PLF INDEPENDENT EVALUTION

Prepared for DFAT

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Clear Horizon

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Acronyms	Description
AE	Approved Employer
APTC	Australia Pacific Training Coalition
AUD	Australian Dollar
CLO	Country Liaison Officer
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DESE	Department of Education, Skills, and Employment
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DPP	Development Partnership Plans
EOPO	End-of-Program Outcome
FIMR	Final Investment Monitoring Report
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
HoM	Head of Mission
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRD	In-country Recruitment Database
IT	Information Technology
KIT	Kiribati Institute of Technology
LMAP	Labour Mobility Assistance Program
LSU	Labour Sending Unit
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MoG	Machinery of Government
NAWPP	Northern Australia Worker Pilot Program
PALM	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility
PALMIS	PALM Information System
PDB	Pre-departure Briefing
PIC	Pacific Island Countries
PLF	Pacific Labour Facility
PLS	Pacific Labour Scheme
PTL	Pacific Timor-Leste

QLP	Quality, Learning and Performance
QTAG	Quality Technical Assurance Group
RSE	Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme
SWP	Seasonal Worker Programme
ToR	Terms of Reference

Acknowledgements

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document reports the findings of an independent evaluation of the *Pacific Labour Facility* (PLF)—a contracted mechanism to support implementation of the *Pacific Labour Scheme* (PLS, 2018-2021) and the *Pacific Australia Labour Mobility* (PALM) scheme (2022-2023). The PALM scheme allows eligible Australian businesses to hire workers from nine Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste to fill labour gaps in Australia. The scheme is managed by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR).

External factors heavily influenced the PLS/PALM scheme's trajectory over the period 2018–2023, impacting all stakeholders. The pandemic is the most obvious example of unexpected externalities. Other events impacting implementation of the scheme included the Black Summer bush fires (2019–2020), numerous localised flooding events, a change of Australian Government, and changes in labour mobility policy manifesting as two machinery of government changes (2021 and 2022) which transferred responsibility for the scheme between Australian government departments. During 2023 there has been progressive transition of PLF responsibilities to DEWR. While the intention was always to grow the scheme incrementally, pandemic-induced labour shortages meant the Australian Government sought a very rapid increase in worker numbers. This growth target was welcomed by labour sending countries given the pandemic-induced economic challenges facing the region. For PLF, the rapid increase in worker numbers demanded new tasks and new scope, supported by additional DFAT funding.

1.1. Effectiveness

Overall, the evaluation team formed the view that PLF delivered effective services to PALM scheme stakeholders against the backdrop of a highly complex and dynamic operating and policy context. PLF has been flexible and responsive to the evolving needs and policy settings of DFAT and DEWR. It has proactively worked to support Approved Employers (AE), workers, Labour Sending Units (LSU), and a range of other stakeholders against dramatic contextual changes. Given the diversity of interests across the classes of stakeholder, it is unsurprising that there are differing levels of satisfaction with PLF performance. PLF has been required to build and maintain relationships with an array of stakeholders in Australia and in 10 countries who each have a legitimate expectation to be kept informed. This has been a challenging task, if only because the efficient flow of information across the whole 'system' requires all parties to play their role, not just PLF.

Labour mobility is acknowledged to be a complex policy domain. The evaluation team heard from multiple stakeholders a sense of wrestling with the core purpose or emphasis of the PALM scheme broadly, and hence PLF's role specifically. Tension arises from the fact that the scheme can be characterised as both i) a domestic employment program aiming to fill labour shortages in Australia; and ii) a development program contributing to family and community wellbeing in labour sending countries. Managing these dual priorities has required balance and proportionality. The evaluation team was advised of current and ongoing steps by DFAT and DEWR to clarify the mandates and responsibilities of the departments in relation to the PALM scheme, and to clarify the various roles of key actors moving forward.

PLF's purpose was formally defined in terms of three end-of-program outcomes (EOPO):

- **EOPO 1:** An increase of appropriately skilled and diverse women and men are mobilised to work in Australia.
- **EOPO 2:** There is a sustainable and growing demand for Pacific women and men workers from Australian industry.
- **EOPO 3:** The PALM scheme maximises benefit and minimises risk to Pacific women and men workers and Pacific and Australian communities.

In general terms, PLF achieved the broad foci of all three EOPOs under difficult circumstances. This is most evident in the expansion (**EOPO 1**) of the scheme in Australia, representing growth of **15,782%** of the long-term stream, and **51%** growth of the short-term stream.

In relation to **EOPO 2**, the long-term stream grew from **36** approved employers (FY2018–19) to a current **460** (including all PALM scheme AEs, long-term and short-term) covering **33** industries. At the time of this evaluation there were a further **167** applications by prospective AEs under review. Many stakeholders acknowledged the apparent sustainability of demand for short-term workers by Australian employers. While the number of women has increased substantially since 2018–19, women make up just 20% of the current worker caseload, arguably reflecting persistent challenges to gender equality in labour sending countries and in Australian workplaces.

An important value proposition to the Australian Government of an outsourced facility such as the PLF is reflected in **EOPO 3** in relation to PLF's efforts to minimise risk to Pacific/Timorese women and men while they are working in Australia. The key risks for workers and the scheme itself can be understood to arise from the three key phases of circular labour mobility: i) Worker readiness; ii) Worker welfare; iii) Worker reintegration—each discussed below.

Worker readiness

Preparing workers for working and living in Australia is the responsibility of labour sending countries. A key PLF initiative was the development and refinement of pre-departure briefing (PDB) material. The length and comprehensiveness of the PDBs evolved over time to respond to the central issue that many workers are unprepared for life/work in Australia and the impact on their families/communities at home. Because worker preparedness underpins the worker welfare caseload (discussed below) there is an understandable reflex to invest more and more in pre-departure training. However, there is a counter argument that there is a diminishing 'finish line' for additional content that should be included in PDB to improve worker readiness. PLF has developed an e-learning platform for workers that will provide information and resources to support them while living and working in Australia. The evaluation team formed the view that PLF's approach to progressively evolving and refining the PDB approach and resources was appropriate.

Worker welfare

Worker welfare issues dominate the PALM scheme and are the greatest source of risk to all parties—not least the workers and their families. Worker support services provided by PLF were highly regarded when worker numbers were limited and demand on the scheme was manageable. But the ability to continue intensive support was outstripped by the growth in worker numbers, necessitating the introduction of a new regional structure and development of new approaches, most notably the 'Community of Care model' and Risk Escalation Matrix backstopped by a Support Services Line. The very rapid growth in worker numbers was accompanied by an increase in adverse impacts in both Australia and labour sending countries arising from workers' lengthy separation from families and communities (the number of critical incidents reported rose from 94 (FY2020-21) to 258 (FY2021-2022), a 274% increase. The management of such risks is critical to preserving the social license for the scheme in Australia and sending countries. The development of the Community of Care model was in response to an October 2020 review that recommended delegating responsibility for worker welfare across an array of stakeholders. While several stakeholders affirmed the rationale, a cross-section of interviewees, including independent researchers, expressed concerns about its efficacy in practice. The firmest criticism of worker support services came from some Pacific diplomatic staff posted in Australia. While there is no disputing the depth of concern, some issues raised indicated misunderstanding about the established processes and mandates, which itself may indicate inadequate communication by Australia-based actors. All stakeholders affirmed the importance of Country Liaison Officers (CLO) resourced by the scheme but answerable to labour sending governments. These roles are seen to provide valuable culturally relevant support for worker welfare, but are currently under-resourced, and may have some overlapping responsibilities with PLF regional staff.

Overall, worker welfare poses significant risks to the scheme in Australia and in sending countries. As it stands, DFAT and DEWR carry almost all risks associated with the scheme, and hence are exposed to criticisms by all parties. Empowering other stakeholders to share responsibility in line with natural incentives and accountabilities may enable a more balanced, sustainable, and cost-effective scheme.

Worker reintegration

PLF had planned to develop a range of reintegration initiatives to support returning workers prior to the first cohorts of PLS workers returning home in 2020-21. This work was side tracked due to reallocating resources to COVID-19 responses and the scheme scale-up. Arguably, the successful social and economic reintegration of workers underpins the 'development rationale' for labour mobility. While studies by the World Bank and Australia National University have established evidence of development impact in Pacific/Timorese households and communities arising from increased expenditure, there are legitimate questions about whether increased expenditure *alone* adequately capitalises on the opportunities presented through labour mobility in terms of fostering *sustainable* development outcomes. The concept note commissioned by DFAT for the next phase of support for the PALM scheme again prioritises support for worker reintegration.

1.2. Efficiency

Over the life of the current contract, there were six contract amendments (with a seventh underway at the time of this evaluation), corresponding to growth in the scheme. Contract amendments were each approved by Commonwealth Section 23 minutes and justified by the additional resources required to respond to growth, and/or changes in PLF's scope of work. Amendments spanned budget increases from AUD 50 million at PLF's inception to a current total of AUD 127,501,134. This growth represents a 155% budget increase against the backdrop of a 15,000% increase in the number of workers, along with a substantial contribution to both Australia's and labour sending country economic activity. Much of the budget increase was required to support additional staff, including for labour sending governments to meet the growth in worker mobilisations. Whole new PLF teams were engaged to respond to the expanding scope, most notably the Australia Engagement through regionally-based teams to enable worker support and industry engagement. Many stakeholders conveyed to the evaluation team admiration for PLF's adaptiveness and diligence under these circumstances. While development program management is rarely flawless, the evaluation team concluded that in the main, PLF made appropriate use of time and resources at each point in the evolution of labour mobility. That said, there were diverse views about the comparative value of the PLF modality. Some Pacific Heads of Mission in Australia expressed concern about the Australian Government engaging a managing contractor, which was perceived to impede the bilateral relationship, though these concerns may derive from not fully understanding DFAT's contractor-led business model—noting that DFAT does not implement programs directly. The evaluation team considered key aspects of PLF's management arrangements and the extent to which they promoted efficiency. The organisation grew from around 10 staff at inception to over 190 staff working through 8 'work-streams'. These workstreams were added progressively in step with changes in demand and were staffed systematically by appropriately qualified individuals—essentially taking a 'just-in-time' approach to growth which conferred value to the Commonwealth. Many stakeholders appreciated the increasing representation of Pacific Islanders among PLF staff. Others acknowledged the culture of reflection and learning that was considered a feature of the way PLF was managed. Particular structures or initiatives were established by PLF and observed to contribute significantly to the efficiency of PALM scheme operations. One example was the PLF Engagement Managers positioned within LSUs to provide capacity building and to broker engagement with Australia-based stakeholders. These roles were key to achieving the growth agenda, and hence contributed significantly to the efficiency of the scheme. A further initiative that increased the efficiency of PLF operations was the establishment of the Community of Care model discussed above. The evaluation team observed clear passion and commitment to labour mobility among PLF staff and noted that many keenly felt responsibility for the scheme's success.

The evaluation team considered that strengthening of partner systems was a strength of PLF's way of working. Clear examples included PLF staff embedded in LSUs and the development of information systems to improve the scheme's efficiency and transparency. In terms of donor harmonisation, there is evidence of cooperation with New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme.

1.3. LSU support

The LSUs are widely acknowledged as being critical to the scheme, and in that context, the capacity-building support provided by DFAT and PLF has been fundamental. There is broad acknowledgement of the value of PLF's work in supporting LSUs. Many stakeholders considered that LSU capacity has improved—including LSU staff themselves as reflected in the results of LSU capacity-self assessments. Nevertheless, other stakeholders questioned the efficacy of capacity-building efforts, expecting that LSUs should by now independently meet Australian demand for workers. This is an assumption of 'sustainability' premised on LSUs being resourced and operated independently of Australian investment. LSU capacity across the region is not uniform, however there is broad agreement (including among LSU staff and PLF staff) that further support for skills and systems consolidation will be required in the next phase of DFAT funding. PLF has invested significantly in LSU payroll, equipment, travel, and office fit-out in circumstances where none of the labour sending governments are allocating budget for PLF, and many PLF staff are not yet recognised public servants. Clearly the issue of 'LSU sustainability' sits within a wider strategic context that demands more nuanced debate.

In addition to investing in LSUs, there may be need for broader support to labour sending governments to evolve their own unique vision/strategy for labour mobility and the resourcing of these strategies. Each labour sending country is progressively evolving its priorities for labour mobility, which remains highly regarded by Pacific citizens. Meanwhile labour mobility offers Australia significant strategic potential. DFAT is currently selecting and deploying Australia-based staff in DFAT posts in the labour sending countries to support more strategic engagement directly by the Australian Government. Labour sending country officials affirmed the need for more strategic government-to-government engagement, indicating that the new strategic labour mobility engagement role in Posts is timely.

1.4. Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) arrangements

The general sentiments amongst key stakeholders with knowledge of PLF's MEL work is positive. Within the PLF organisational structure MEL was managed by the Quality, Learning and Performance (QLP) team, which also included two gender equality and social inclusion (GEDSI) specialists—a structure widely seen as a strength. The MEL work was adequately resourced. Ordinarily, MEL for international development programs may be conceived as testing the merits of the underlying theory of change. But a parallel focus of PLF was on keeping track of a range of service metrics for in-Australia operations. For much of the early implementation period, this data management was done with spreadsheets before PLF was tasked to undertake significant information system development. A software development team (2.5 FTE) was recruited in-house and consumed significant focus by QLP.

Beyond the data management and responsiveness to DFAT/DEWR information needs, there is evidence that the work of the QLP team had more profound influence. MEL information was used for program improvement, such as responsive research that addressed shortcomings in the Skills Development Program, and analysis of critical incident and worker disengagement data that informed the Regional Engagement team planning. In retrospect, PLF's research strategy many have been ambitious relative to the resources investment, however it nonetheless underpinned important products and directions. A key feature of the research agenda was the way that the QLP team coordinated with third-party researchers in labour mobility, thereby adding value and promoting cross-sector learning.

1.5. Summary of recommendations

1. DFAT should continue to resource through diplomatic missions in Australia an expanded gender equitable network of CLOs commensurate with the number and distribution of workers.

2. DFAT/DEWR should commission a comprehensive review of the Community of Care model, including the delineation of roles between LSUs, AEs and CLOs.

3. The next phase of the PLF should further prioritise ways to support employability and entrepreneurship among returning workers to leverage the development benefits of labour mobility.

4. DFAT Posts should explore ways to integrate/align upcoming Development Partnership Plans (DPP) with relevant strategies that leverage local PALM scheme priorities (e.g. skills development, entrepreneurship, employment incentives, government revenue).

5. DFAT and DEWR should commission a process to broker and articulate understanding of mandates and responsibilities among all key PALM scheme stakeholders, including periodic review and update.

6. DFAT should continue to proactively engage in strategic bilateral dialogue and programming with partner countries in support of their national labour mobility policy, strategy, and governance.

7. The design team for the next phase of the PLF should ensure adequate resourcing of ongoing information system rollout and support, a robust and responsive research agenda, and a high standard of MEL including benchmarking of quality and value-for-money.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. Synopsis

This document reports the findings of an independent evaluation of the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF)—a contracted mechanism to support implementation of the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS, 2018-2021) and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme (2022-2023). The evaluation was undertaken over the period June – September 2023 and focussed on the coordination of support services by PLF, including capacity building invested in labour sending countries and the monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) arrangements. The evaluation team comprised one independent evaluator and two core members of a Quality Technical Assurance Group (QTAG) commissioned by DFAT to undertake annual reviews of PLF. The evaluation team reviewed key documentation and undertook more than 50 hours of interviews with an array of stakeholders in Australia Vanuatu, Tonga, and Kiribati.

2.2. Background

The PALM scheme[1] allows eligible Australian businesses to hire workers from nine Pacific Island Countries (PIC) and Timor-Leste to fill labour gaps in rural and regional Australia, and nationally for agriculture and select agriculture-related food product manufacturing sectors. The scheme offers employers access to a pool of reliable, productive workers. It also allows Pacific and Timor-Leste (PTL) workers to take up jobs in Australia, develop their skills and send income home. Through the PALM scheme, eligible businesses can recruit workers for short-term jobs for up to nine months, or long-term roles for between one and four years, in unskilled, low-skilled, and semi-skilled positions.

The PALM scheme is managed by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). The PLF is a professional support service contracted to Palladium by the Commonwealth of Australia. The contract was established by DFAT for management of the PLS and was administered by DFAT from its inception in 2018 until July 2022, when responsibility for management of the contract was transferred to DEWR as part of Machinery of Government (MoG) changes that followed the change of Australian Government. Its budget increased from AUD 50 million at inception to a current total of AUD 127,501,134 (representing a 155% expansion). It is currently set to conclude on 31 December 2023.[2]

In accord with DFAT's International Development Programming Guide, an independent evaluation was commissioned by the department to ensure accountability, promote learning, support the Final Investment Monitoring Reporting (FIMR), and inform the design of a new phase of support for the PALM scheme.

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[1] https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/
[2] Subsequently the contract has been extended until 31 December 2024.

2.3. Context

The report findings require some knowledge of the recent history of circular labour mobility to Australia from the nine participating Pacific countries and Timor-Leste, as follows (in chronological order).[3]

The Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) was launched in 2012 following a pilot which began in 2008. SWP was a seasonal work program in the agriculture and horticulture industries. [4] Workers were granted visas to work for up to 9 months in any 12-month period. The program was managed by the Department of Education, Skills, and Employment (DESE).[5] It is now managed by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR)

The Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) officially began on 1 July 2018 (following Northern Australia Worker Pilot Program, NAWPP)[6] but the contract with the managing provider (referred to as the 'Pacific Labour Facility') was not signed until September 2018. The scheme was managed by DFAT.

Unlike the SWP which targeted seasonal work in unskilled and low skilled roles, the PLS targeted longer-term roles in sectors experiencing semi-skilled labour shortages in rural and regional Australia. PLS workers were granted visas of up to three-years (subsequently extended to four years).[7] Most significantly, the PLS aimed to support participating countries in achieving their economic and social development goals. This represented a step-change in Australia's approach to labour mobility from the Pacific and Timor-Leste.

The Pacific Australian Labour Mobility scheme (PALM scheme) was announced in mid-September 2021, and (notionally) began on 4 April 2022. The PALM scheme combined SWP (now referred to as the 'short-term stream') and PLS (now referred to as the 'long-term stream'). The scheme helps fill labour gaps in rural and regional Australia and nationally for agriculture and select agriculture-related food product manufacturing sectors by offering employers access to a pool of reliable, productive workers. It allows Pacific and Timor-Leste workers to take up jobs in Australia, develop their skills and send income home.[8] Information about the departmental responsibilities for the PALM scheme is provided below.

External factors heavily influenced the PLS/PALM scheme's trajectory over the period 2018 - 2023, impacting all PLS/PALM scheme stakeholders. The PLF has operated within a changing environment requiring the facility to operate in a constantly reactive mode to unanticipated externalities beyond its control. Consequently, other than during its first 12-18 months, PLF has not operated in a stable business-as-usual state.

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[3] Participating countries are Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

[4] SWP also provided workers for the accommodation industry when it was demonstrated as seasonal (mostly WA).

[5] Note that earlier in the life of SWP, DESE's predecessor departments had different names.

[6] The Northern Australia Worker Pilot Program shaped much of PLF's early engagement and welfare approach with workers, AEs, and acted as a bridging function between the start of the PLS and PLF.

[7] Workers must return home for a period of at least six months before they may apply for another PALM scheme Visa.

[8] https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/

The pandemic is the most obvious example of unexpected externalities which created a complicated and at times unpredictable operating environment. Border closures meant PLS and SWP workers were unable to return home (and in some cases unable to work) requiring ongoing welfare monitoring. The emergence of more complex welfare cases such as worker pregnancies and serious illness required intensive welfare management by PLF. Some Approved Employer (AE) businesses such as hospitality were closed indefinitely due to COVID, requiring workers to be redeployed into other industries and locations. During this time PLF assisted DEWR with welfare support of SWP workers unable to return home, which created significant increase in the PLF's Worker Support Team's workload. Other events affecting worker welfare such as the Black Summer bush fires (2019-2020) and numerous localised flooding events in areas where AEs and workers are located also added pressure to PLF's business-as-usual work.

While the original intention was to grow PLS incrementally, pandemic-induced labour shortages meant the Australian Government sought a very rapid increase in worker numbers via its "Restart" (September 2020) and "Doubling" (September 2021) announcements.[9] This growth target was welcomed by labour sending countries given the pandemic-induced economic challenges facing the region. For PLF, the very rapid increase in worker numbers required new tasks such as chartering flights and navigating state-based quarantine processes, as well as rapidly designing new systems appropriate for operating at scale, such as expanded worker welfare arrangements.[10] Most importantly, the increase in worker numbers meant PLF's role changed from a hands-on implementor to one of facilitator and oversight. AEs were required to assume more responsibilities that were previously undertaken by PLF - for mobilisation, on-arrival briefing and worker welfare support. Given the growth priority, mobilisation-related activities became the focus of PLF, LSU and DFAT efforts. Put simply, everybody's efforts were focused on getting workers on charter flights and ensuring they could cross federal and state borders and complete quarantine requirements. Given this focus, quality indicators were given less attention e.g. AE/industry diversity, GEDSI, and building the capacity of government teams in sending countries responsible for worker recruitment and mobilisation (referred to as Labour Sending Units or LSUs).

On-going political decision-making about labour mobility arrangements led to uncertainty and concern among SWP/PLS/PALM scheme stakeholders, requiring PLF to significantly increase its communication and relationship management efforts. Such decision-making has led to two substantial MoG changes – in the first (2021) the DESE transferred management of SWP to DFAT as part of the alignment of SWP and PLS under the PALM scheme; and in the second (2022), the newly formed DEWR assumed responsibility for domestic operations including operational policy, while DFAT retained responsibility for PALM scheme policy (non-operational), engagement with sending countries, strategic communications and stakeholder engagement.[11] During 2023 there has been progressive transition of PLF responsibilities to DEWR.

The graph overleaf depicts a timeline of key events.

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[9] In the eight-month period September 2020 - May 2021, over 6000 SWP and PLS workers were mobilised to Australia. Two sectors - agriculture and meat processing - dominated recruitment.
[10] The mobilisations via chartered flights during state border closures involved PLF in a high level of coordination – with Industry, LSUs, and state governments (for border closure exemptions, State health department approval for every worker entering the country, quarantine accommodation, vaccine evidence etc).
[11] It is important to note that following the first MOG (Jan 2022) DFAT was working towards not only consolidation of the two schemes (SWP and PLS) under DFAT's management, but also outsourcing domestic operations to PLF. DFAT would retain in-house capacity to oversight the PLF role but much of the work undertaken by DEWR in relation to SWP would be outsourced. This process was well-progressed, and then a decision was made in the October 2022 budget to insource domestic operations which required DFAT to reverse this reform trajectory.
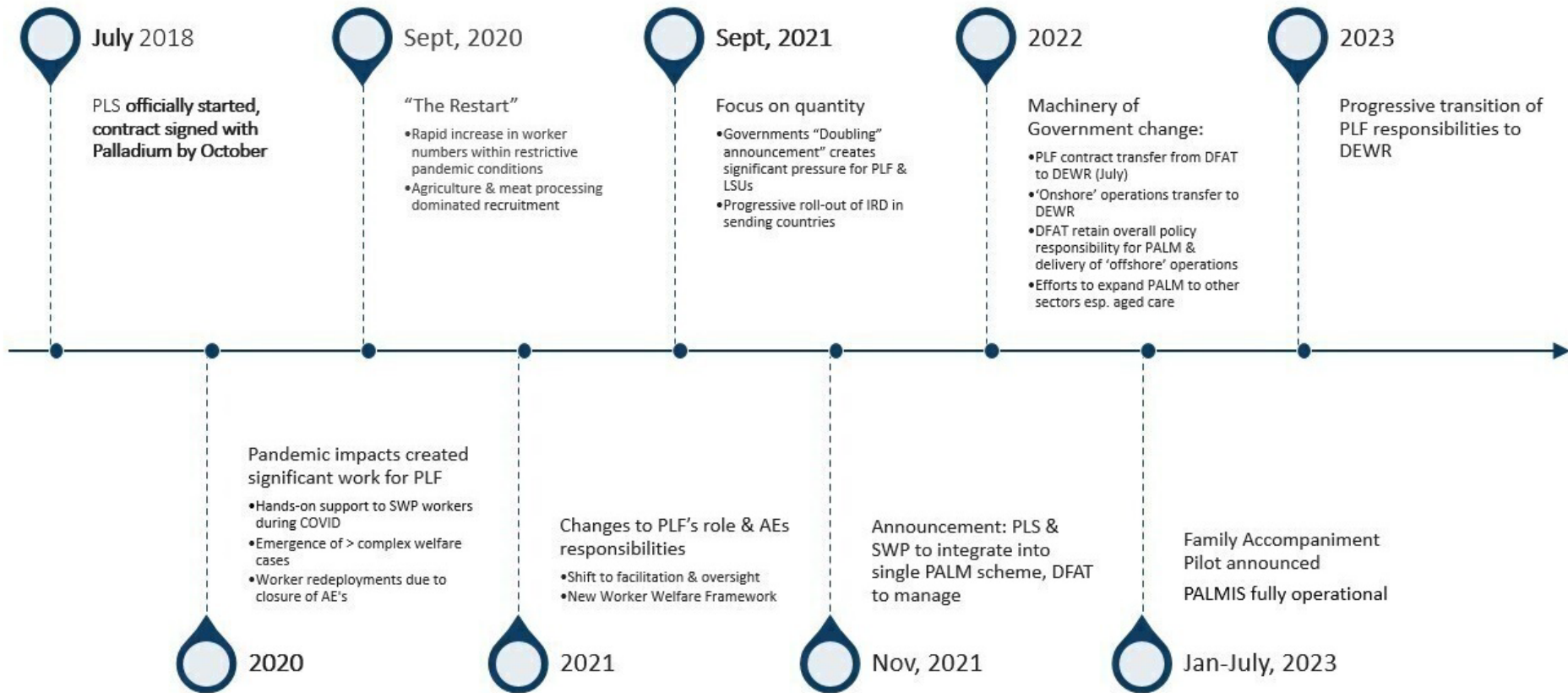
Figure 1: Timeline of key events in the life-of-investment

July 2018
PLS **officially started, contract signed with Palladium by October**

2020
Pandemic impacts created significant work for PLF
- Hands-on support to SWP workers during COVID
- Emergence of > complex welfare cases
- Worker redeployments due to closure of AE's

Sept, 2020
"The Restart"
- Rapid increase in worker numbers within restrictive pandemic conditions
- Agriculture & meat processing dominated recruitment

2021
Changes to PLF's role & AEs responsibilities
- Shift to facilitation & oversight
- New Worker Welfare Framework

Sept, 2021
Focus on quantity
- Governments "Doubling" announcement" creates significant pressure for PLF & LSUs
- Progressive roll-out of IRD in sending countries

Nov, 2021
Announcement: PLS & SWP to integrate into single PALM scheme, DFAT to manage

2022
Machinery of Government change:
- PLF contract transfer from DFAT to DEWR (July)
- 'Onshore' operations transfer to DEWR
- DFAT retain overall policy responsibility for PALM & delivery of 'offshore' operations
- Efforts to expand PALM to other sectors esp. aged care

Jan-July, 2023
Family Accompaniment Pilot announced
PALMIS fully operational

2023
Progressive transition of PLF responsibilities to DEWR

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Audience

DFAT commissioned this evaluation to meet internal corporate needs, and hence will be the primary audience (specifically, the Pacific Labour Policy and Engagement Branch). A DFAT-appointed design team for the next phase of support for the PALM scheme will also benefit from the evaluation findings, along with DEWR, which has been undertaking stakeholder consultations since December 2022 about the next phase of in-Australia support for labour mobility. Secondary audiences include PTL governments (in particular, Heads of Mission based in Australia, LSU Directors, and other senior government officials involved in labour mobility). PLF management and staff who provided support for the evaluation and may also benefit from findings.

3.2. Scope

The evaluation was framed by a Terms of Reference (ToR) prepared by DFAT (see Appendix A). The evaluation pursued three lines of inquiry which assimilated the more than 16 questions posed in the ToR[12]:

- The effectiveness and efficiency of PLF's coordination of support services across all stages of the employer and worker journey in the PALM scheme (see Appendix B for an articulation of 'employer-worker journey').
- The effectiveness of PLF's services and capacity building of LSUs.
- The appropriateness and utility of MEL arrangements.

In line with DFAT policy priorities, the evaluation team also explored the integration of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) and sustainability principles across the various domains of PLF work. The evaluation focussed on PLF's role in the period September 2018 – June 2023.

3.3. Methods

The evaluation team was influenced by a 'utilisation focused approach'[13] which is based on the premise that an evaluation should be judged by the extent to which it is useful for its intended users. In line with DFAT's M&E Standards,[14] the evaluation team drafted an evaluation plan which was approved by DFAT after consultation with key stakeholders. The plan identified three broad methods:

- **Document review:** a review of key PLF and PALM scheme documents provided by DFAT and PLF; relevant literature in relation to the target countries or labour mobility policy.
- **Key informant interviews:** semi-structured conversations with purposively sampled stakeholders to accrue responses to key evaluation questions. Interviews were undertaken in Australia (Canberra, Brisbane and on virtual platforms), Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Tonga.

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[12] Note that in keeping with DFAT's approach to investment evaluations, this evaluation does not assess PLF's performance against contractual milestones. DFAT has a separate and internal process for contractor performance assessment which occurs annually. Neither does this evaluation attempt to comprehensively document the breadth of achievements and challenges encountered by PLF over the life of the contract—a task ordinarily undertaken as part of completion reporting requirements by the contractor.

[13] Patton, M.Q. (2008). Utilization-focused evaluation, 4th edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

[14] https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-design-monitoring-evaluation-learning-standards.pdf

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- **Observations:** general observations of operating contexts, processes and stakeholder interactions including, but not limited to, PLF corporate headquarters, LSU offices, stakeholder workshops, partner government departments, Australian government departments.

More than 50 hours of interviews were undertaken with an array of stakeholders (see Appendix C). Evaluation team members took individual notes, which were then assimilated against the evaluation questions using qualitative analysis techniques to identify predominant and exceptional/outlier responses. Findings were structured against DFAT's FIMR sub-criteria (see box in section 4.2).

This report gives voice to the key themes identified in interviews and documents, structured around the three lines of inquiry set out above. When deemed appropriate, the evaluation team have provided verbatim to highlight indicative or predominate perspectives, noting that in evaluation and social research literature, direct quotations are an important way to strengthen the validity of qualitative findings. However, the identity of specific interviewees is protected beyond identifying their general role.

The evaluation team acknowledges that this evaluation was informed by a wide range of documentation by PLF, researchers and government departments. Most of this information was previously submitted as discrete reports. In this report, the evaluation team has emphasised primary data (mostly from key informant interviews) but has cited secondary data sources when relevant.

3.4. Limitations

All evaluations of this kind encounter limitations—if only because of the pragmatics of time and resource constraints. These and a range of other factors limit the capacity for independent evaluators to grasp the full breadth of nuance that underpins a complex policy domain such as the PALM scheme.

The evaluation team endeavoured to manage obvious limitations by seeking gender-equitable coverage where possible and otherwise aligning with international good practice as set out in DFAT's M&E standards and in relevant codes of ethics.[15] Central to the strategy to address methodological limitations was close collaboration with DFAT and PLF staff.

A specific challenge encountered by the evaluation team related to the boundaries between PLF and the PALM scheme more broadly. While the evaluation team's scope was limited to PLF, the nature of the work and the policy domain meant that broader policy and context issues inevitably emerged as relevant to discussions and findings. The evaluation did not explore the impact of labour mobility in labour sending countries or on individual workers. That said, several returned workers were interviewed and provided valuable insights.

Other practical limitations included:

- The evaluation team did not visit any work sites in Australia but interviewed an Australian AE representative body.
- The evaluation team was resourced to visit three labour sending countries: Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Tonga. This sample of countries was informed by extensive stakeholder consultations led by DFAT. The sample provided the evaluation team with exposure to a breadth of relevant contexts, though self-evidently was not a census of all 10 labour sending countries.
- The evaluation team had limited time in each country visited, and hence some stakeholders were unavailable for interview—including some important partner government stakeholders.
- Many key stakeholders have changed roles over the life of the PLF investment, and hence were unavailable or no longer recalled (or had access to) specific information.

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[15] E.g., https://www.aes.asn.au/images/AES_Code_of_Ethics_web.pdf?type=file

Clear Horizon

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of this evaluation, structured around the three key evaluation questions concerned with: the effectiveness and efficiency of PLF services, the effectiveness of PLF's capacity building of LSUs, and the appropriateness and utility of the MEL arrangements. The evaluation team has highlighted verbatim from stakeholders to illustrate the predominant themes/viewpoints, and on some occasions, exceptional or outlier themes to illustrate diversity. We confirm that we approached this evaluation in good faith, without bias and present balanced findings in the report. Recommendations are presented in grey boxes in the narrative, in the context in which they arise. They are summarised for convenience on page 6 in the introductory pages of this document.

The evaluation team appreciates that evaluations may be perceived as inherently critical when directed at program improvement. Notwithstanding critique in this report, the overwhelming feedback from the majority of stakeholders was positivity towards labour mobility in general and PLF in particular. It is clear that Australia's labour mobility scheme continues to evolve and improve, benefiting a large number of households and communities in the Pacific and Timor-Leste, as well as benefiting Australian industry and the economy more broadly. Moreover, the scheme fosters people-to-people links through the array of engagements between workers and host communities across Australia. While there are undoubtedly areas for further improvement in the implementation of the scheme, it is clear that there is strong support from most stakeholders for its continued development.

4.1. Summary of findings

Overall, the evaluation team formed the view that PLF has delivered effective and efficient services to PALM scheme stakeholders against the backdrop of a highly complex and dynamic operating and policy context. These services were delivered in culturally appropriate ways with sending country stakeholders (discussed in section 4.2.1). PLF supported unforeseen increases in the number of workers arriving in Australia, including a modest increase in female workers, during a period of global and domestic upheaval. To accommodate the increase in scale, PLF evolved its structure, size and ways of working, while remaining responsive to key stakeholders (see section 4.2.2). There was a strong focus on assuring worker welfare in Australia—though a range of stakeholders reflected concerns that current arrangements in relation to frontline worker support could be improved or at least clarified—a finding also borne out in independent research.[16] In labour sending countries, PLF support to LSUs is widely appreciated, though capacity building ambition was curbed by the need for capacity substitution to respond to growth in the scheme. There were notable improvements to worker readiness processes, and the rollout of bespoke information systems is considered an important contributor to the scheme's efficiency and transparency moving forward. Plans to develop worker reintegration processes were not fully delivered, again compromised by the demands of growth. MEL processes were found to be responsive, and while there was heavy emphasis on capturing and reporting worker metrics, there were also clear cases of research and reflexive practice that contributed to program improvement and informed policy directions.

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[16] https://devpolicy.org/safety-and-wellbeing-of-palm-workers-room-for-improvement-20231116/

The PALM scheme remains an appealing proposition for workers, their communities and for labour sending governments. It is also a strategically important initiative for Australian foreign policy, and for Australian domestic workforce. Most stakeholders agree that there will need to be further support provided to the scheme along the lines of PLF, though there must be clearer delineation of responsibilities and accountabilities between the large array of stakeholders concerned.

The above summary of findings is elaborated in the following sections.

4.2. Effectiveness and efficiency of PLF services

This evaluation was tasked with assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of PLF's coordination of services "*across all stages of the employer and worker journey*".[17] The evaluation team's conceptualisation of the employer and worker journey is shown in Appendix B.

In this section we present findings in relation to PLF effectiveness and efficiency based on DFAT's Final Investment Monitoring Report (FIMR) validation sub-criteria (see box). This structure provides an established/familiar elaboration of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria, and will also support DFAT in preparing an upcoming FIMR for PLF.

DFAT's FIMR Validation Matrix defines 'effectiveness' and 'efficiency' with reference to 11 sub-criteria.

Effectiveness:

- Achievement of intended outcomes

- Measurability and plausibility of outcome statements
- Partner and beneficiary satisfaction and behaviour change
- Responsiveness to additional priorities, including in relation to the COVID-19 Development Response Plan
- Adequacy of policy dialogue or partner engagement to influence development priorities

Efficiency:

- Appropriateness of time and resources used
- Budget deviation
- Comparative value of the modality
- Adequacy of governance and management arrangements
- Appropriateness of staff skill and experience
- Harmonisation with donors and partner systems

Figure 2: DFAT FIMR Validation sub-criteria for effectiveness and efficiency

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[17] The evaluation question which underpins this task can be interpreted from at least two perspectives: i) 'coordination', as in the coherent integration of specific services delivered by PLF in Australia with services delivered in labour sending countries; ii) 'coordination', as in the generalised management or oversight of all services delivered by PLF, whether in Australia or labour sending countries. The evaluation team took the latter interpretation because there are relatively few points when coordination—in the former sense—actually occurs between services in Australia and services in labour sending countries. These are limited to: i) management of critical incidents; ii) responding to employer-related issues raised by workers; iii) Assurance Team interventions in response to employer-worker issues identified in routine monitoring and incident management.

4.2.1. Effectiveness

The following discussion is structured against DFAT's five FIMR sub-criteria for effectiveness.

PLF's purpose was defined in terms of three end-of-program outcomes (EOPO):

- **EOPO 1:** An increase of appropriately skilled and diverse women and men are mobilised to work in Australia.
- **EOPO 2:** There is a sustainable and growing demand for Pacific women and men workers from Australian industry.
- **EOPO 3:** The PALM scheme maximises benefit and minimises risk to Pacific women and men workers and Pacific and Australian communities.

In general terms, PLF achieved the broad foci of all three outcomes under difficult circumstances. This is most evident in the growth (**EOPO 1**) in the number of long-term workers in Australia. At the time PLF was mobilised (late 2018) there were a total of **91 workers** in Australia under the then Northern Australia Worker Pilot Program (NAWPP). These visa holders were transferred to PLS. As at the end of September 2023 there were **14,453** long-term workers in Australia, representing growth of **15,782%**. In relation to the short-term stream, numbers have also grown. A PLF manager reflected:

> *"Initially the concern was, would anybody want workers? The whole orientation of the program was about building demand in Australia. The situation is now very different to what it was then…the original design anticipated 2,000 workers, a target which seemed too big to imagine".*

A core intention of the Australian Government in establishing the scheme was to demonstrate responsiveness to PTL requests for better access to the Australian labour market. While growth was always an intention—and explicitly part of the PLF scope of work—the unanticipated high growth was driven by at least four interconnected factors:

1. Australian labour market forces which manifested as falling unemployment rates, creating additional demand for foreign workers.
2. COVID-19 border closures which created additional demand for workers—especially in key industries such as meat processing where a small number of large labour hire companies harnessed the opportunity presented by the PALM scheme.[18]
3. Pacific workers had developed a reputation for being quality, reliable workers.
4. Sending countries were seeking labour mobility work opportunities to counter impacts of the pandemic on their economies.

A DEWR official observed:

> *"There was a massive incentive to bring people into Australia because there were [insufficient] workers. The [limited economic opportunities in the Pacific] provided an incentive to supply workers".*

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[18] In 2022, 21% of PLS AEs were labour hire companies who employed 84% of workers.

Clear H⌂rizon

The evaluation team heard broad acknowledgement from a diversity of interviewees about PLF's responsiveness and professionalism in the context of dramatic growth. An independent researcher observed:

> *"What has worked well is PLF's responsiveness to changes that were externally imposed…flexibility has been the main strength. The whole meat industry scale-up was impressive—a huge achievement in the context of COVID".*

In relation to **EOPO 2**, the long-term stream has grown from **36 AEs** in FY2018-19 to a current **460** (including all PALM scheme AEs) covering **33** industries. At the time of this evaluation there were a further 167 applications by prospective AEs under review. Many stakeholders acknowledged apparent sustainability in demand for short-term workers by Australian employers.

A more nuanced emphasis within EOPO 2 relates to the promotion of gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI). In this regard, while there is clear evidence of growing and sustainable demand in Australia for workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste, and while the number of women increased substantially since 2018–19, women make up just 20% of the current worker caseload. The evaluation team was advised of a range of important initiatives undertaken by PLF to promote GEDSI, but the above figures highlight the fact that major cultural and workplace challenges endure in labour sending countries and in Australian workplaces in relation to the gender equality agenda.[19] Unsurprisingly, there were limits to what PLF could influence in this regard. Many stakeholders acknowledged the need for more time and persistence to further improve equality and inclusion in the scheme.

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[19] It also reflects pandemic-related circumstances - when Australian borders were only open to meatworks and agriculture sector workers, the percent of women in the scheme decreased sharply. The introduction of the aged care expansion pilots has seen women's representation increase and stabilise around 20%.

GEDSI

PLF appointed two staff in 2020/21 to advance the gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) agenda in the scheme. Progress was hampered by COVID-19 but notable initiatives are underway; for example: i) establishment of an inclusive employment working group that draws representatives from all PLF teams to identify actions that strengthen GEDSI in PALM scheme systems; ii) integrating GEDSI responsibilities into key PLF in-country position descriptions; iii) undertaking three aged care initiatives to increase employment opportunities for women; iv) prioritising GEDSI in the LSU capacity self-assessments that PLF facilitate; v) GEDSI training for PLS staff; vi) resources such as fact sheets and training materials for various target audiences to address GEDSI-related matters such as gender-based violence and sexual health..

Importantly, the concept of GEDSI as a policy priority has been expanded to encompass key issues across the labour mobility "journey" such as family separation, child protection for children left at home, and family psychosocial wellbeing.

Notwithstanding a range of significant initiatives to promote inclusive recruitment practices, worker recruitment remains heavily male dominant. There have been some gains in recruitment of women in aged care (approximately 65% female) and meat processing (approximately 26% female), but women continue represent a small proportion (about a fifth) of PALM scheme workers.

A Disability Inclusion Pathway Design was produced in April 2022 which was reviewed by DFAT's Disability, Indigenous Issues and Social Inclusion Section. Progress has been made in sending countries via a range of initiatives to support LSUs to include disability inclusion in their work. However, implementing this document has proven to be more problematic at the Australian-end, with AEs' apparent reluctance to recruit PALM scheme workers with disability. A study was starting at the time of interviewing for this evaluation to understand how AEs could be supported in PALM scheme disability inclusion efforts. This lack of progress is likely a reflection of many Australian employers' ambivalent responses to disability inclusion, rather than a PALM scheme-specific issue.

An important value proposition to the Australian Government of an outsourced facility such as PLF is reflected in **EOPO 3** in relation to PLF's efforts to minimise risk to Pacific/Timorese women and men workers while they are working in Australia. Reflecting on risks, a senior PLF team member said:

> *"What PLF does is manage risks for DFAT and DEWR, whether conducting due diligence on employers, supporting workers when they're in trouble, the compliance and assurance work for DEWR or the offshore services to help LSUs supply workers to meet demand".*

Another senior PLF team member described the risks associated with labour mobility for sending countries and the challenges associated with supporting them:

> *"The range of risks needs to be managed because they can undermine the social license of the scheme, both in Australia and in the region…But there's a real bind between being paternalistic in supporting PICs to address risks and the domestic implications of labour mobility, but then overloading PICs governments and burdening them, or permitting harm".*

Clear Horizon

The key risks for workers and the scheme itself can be understood to arise from the key phases of circular labour mobility:

- Worker readiness
- Worker welfare
- Worker reintegration

The risks associated with each of these three phases and how they have been managed by PLF are discussed below in relation to EOPO 3.

Worker readiness

Preparing workers for working and living in Australia is the responsibility of sending countries. A key PLF initiative was the development and refinement of pre-departure briefing (PDB) material for labour sending country governments to use at their discretion. The PDB provides information for workers to support navigation through welfare and workplace challenges once they are employed in Australia. The length and comprehensiveness of the PDBs have evolved, with PLF developing a professional *Pre-departure Briefing Workers Handbook.*[20] LSUs have different approaches to delivering the compulsory PDB which is of at least two days duration.[21]

In Vanuatu, PLF worked with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and World Vision to explore an expanded model of PDB (at least 1 week) which extends beyond critical information about employment and travel to also addressing life-skills such as maintaining relationships with children and spouse and financial planning. This training has been independently evaluated and found to influence attitudes and practices[22] but is offered for voluntary participation (hence reaches only a small percentage of workers and spouses) and carries an additional cost burden that is difficult to justify at scale.

The central issue is a recognition that many workers are unprepared for life/work in Australia and the impact on their families/communities at home. A returned worker wondered "*how some workers even got to Australia…they couldn't even read the bin numbers for fruit picking*".

Because worker preparedness underpins the worker welfare caseload (discussed below), there is an understandable reflex to invest more and more in pre-departure training. However, there is a counter-argument that no amount of PDB can mitigate the issues because in large part they stem from the fact that many workers (especially in the short-term stream) come from low-literacy rural backgrounds and experience information overload in circumstances where the cultural differences they encounter are stark. A returned worker reflected: "*You think you're prepared, but once you're there it's just so different. A lot of people are just overwhelmed*".

Notionally, there is a diminishing 'finish line' for additional content that should be included in PDB to improve worker readiness. Put another way, PLF could go to the absurd extent of creating a whole degree in 'worker readiness' across all domains of modern living and it would still encounter challenges on two fronts: the absorptive capacity of workers and the raw socio-economic and cultural differences between labour sending countries and Australia. To this end, PLF has developed an e-learning platform for workers that will provide information and resources to support them while living and working in Australia.[23]

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[20] Revised 6 April 2022.

[21] In Fiji, the National Employment Centre delivers a compulsory five-day PDB. The I-Kiribati LSU outsources delivery of the PDB to the Kiribati Institute of Technology.

[22] The evaluation team was advised that in several cases, following participation in the expanded training, couples have elected to decline PALM scheme employment having more fully appreciated the risks.

[23] The e-learning platform is also targeted at Approved Employers via an AE portal.

Clear Horizon

There is evidence of learning and a clear commitment among PLF/LSU staff to optimising worker prospects in Australia within the available time and resources. The evaluation team formed the view that PLF's approach to progressively evolving and refining the PDB approach and resources has been appropriate and should continue. There are opportunities for further improvements, but these should be balanced against pragmatics and the local contexts in labour sending countries.

Worker welfare

The term worker welfare used below refers to support mechanisms to ensure the health and wellbeing of workers while they are in Australia. It does not include issues associated with work such as pay and deductions. Worker welfare issues dominate the PALM scheme and are the greatest source of risk to all parties—not least the workers and their families. LSUs are routinely drawn (remotely) into worker welfare issues in Australia, but often lack visibility of the issues or clarity about how to resolve them.[24]

Worker support services provided by PLF were highly regarded when worker numbers were limited and demand on the scheme was manageable. Several interviewees described worker support by PLF at that time as a "*concierge service*", with arriving workers being collected from the airport and supported with banking and mobile phone acquisition etc. Workers knew the names and contact details of PLF staff members. But the ability to continue intensive support was outstripped by the growth in worker numbers, necessitating the introduction of a new regional structure and development of new approaches to worker welfare, including the 'Community of Care model', Risk Escalation Matrix, and the Support Services Line.

The development of the Community of Care model was in response to a recommendation in an October 2020 Review of the Pacific Labour Facility.[25] The Community of Care model essentially seeks to delegate responsibility for worker welfare across an array of stakeholders based on a risk escalation framework (Figure 3) with the AE having primary responsibility.[26]
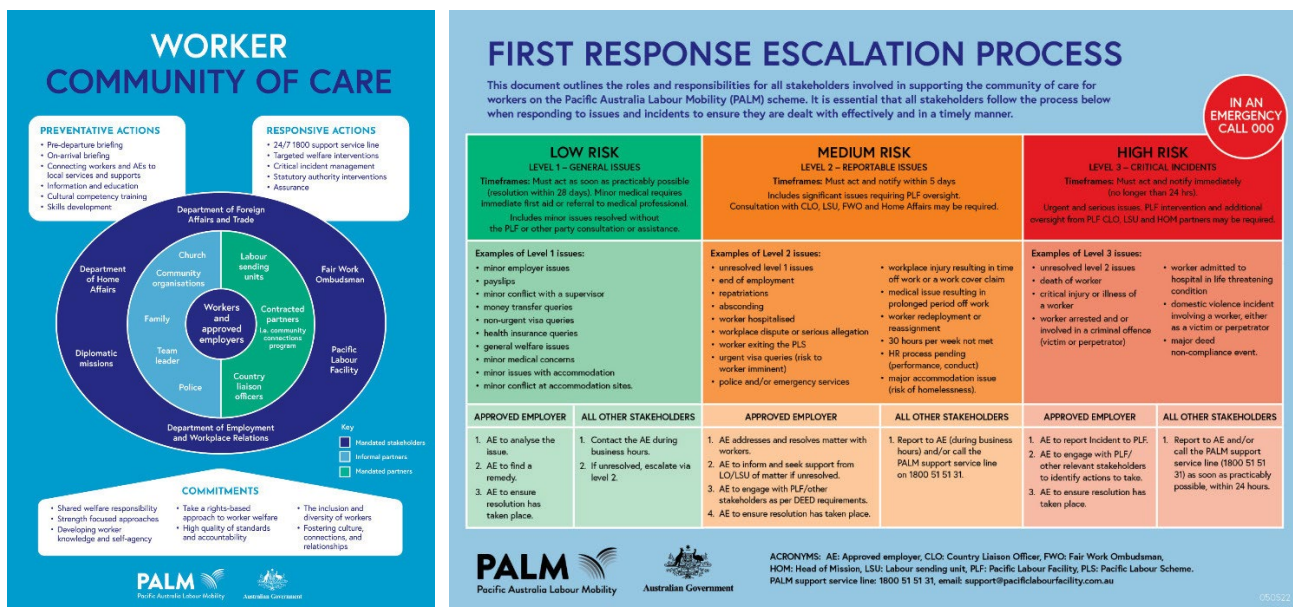

Figure 3: Community of Care model and risk escalation framework

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[24] A commonly raised issue involves the spouse of workers demanding that the LSU (perceived as a proxy for the employer) repatriate a worker suspected of extramarital affairs. While it is not uncommon for an employer in sending countries to intervene in private matters, the constraints on LSU staff imposed by Australian employment law and privacy provisions are not necessarily understood by households, creating frustration with LSU staff.

[25] https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/countries-and-regions/review-pacific-labour-facility-and-management-response.

[26] https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/resources/palm-scheme-approved-employer-deed-agreement

Employers have been supported by the PLF Brisbane-based Worker Support Team and the regionally-based Australia Engagement Team whose role included supporting AEs to build worker welfare support capacity. The evaluation team confirmed the establishment and operation of these teams, and formed the view that they were staffed with professional and committed individuals. However, it was not possible to separate the function of PLF from the way the Community of Care model is operating within the PALM scheme more broadly (which is outside the scope of this evaluation). There is likely to be value in undertaking a dedicated review of the Community of Care model.

The development of this approach to assuring worker welfare by PLF was rational and defensible under the circumstances (see further discussion in section 4.2.2, efficiency). But while several stakeholders affirmed the rationale, a cross-section of interviewees expressed concerns about its efficacy in practice,[27] confirming previous findings by the QTAG[28] and also independent research by the Australian National University (ANU)[29]. A DevPolicy blog[30] summarising the findings states:

> *"When we asked workers about barriers to accessing wellbeing support, the number one barrier (selected by 56.4% of respondents) was "worried about losing job or visa". Under the scheme's worker support arrangements, workers are told that their employer should be their first point of contact if they have a problem. But workers can be reluctant to seek help through this avenue due to the fear of losing their opportunity to work in Australia. Other researchers have drawn similar conclusions, stating that the potential benefit of reporting a problem (for example sexual harassment) can be outweighed by the potential risk of not being sponsored for subsequent work seasons. Some employer representatives that we spoke to said that, while their agreements with the government require them to support the welfare and wellbeing of their workers, they did not feel adequately equipped to do so".*

In this evaluation, the sharpest criticism of worker support services came from some Pacific diplomatic staff posted in Australia.[31] In response, other stakeholders contended that frustrations and some of the criticisms arose from misunderstanding about the established arrangements[32]. Regardless, there is no disputing the depth of the concerns, and that this situation at best indicates inadequate communication by Australia-based actors.

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[27] The evaluation team assessed that Level 1 of the escalation process was not working as intended (or variable at best), thereby potentially additional pressure on Level 2. Some interviewees postulated that this may be one factor driving increased 'worker disengagement' which grew from 14 in FY2020-21 to 1002 in FY2022-23, a 70-fold increase.

[28] Pacific Labour Mobility QTAG 2nd Annual Review, Clear Horizon, June 2021

[29] https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/305641/1/Safety%20and%20Wellbeing_Kanan%20and%20Putt%20online%20small%20file%20NEW%20DOI.pdf

[30] https://devpolicy.org/safety-and-wellbeing-of-palm-workers-room-for-improvement-20231116/

[31] Several PTL High Commissions reported being inundated with worker welfare support requests—a responsibility they feel keenly. There was frustration with the flow of worker welfare information from PLF to the diplomatic missions. One Head of Mission (HoM) stated: "*It's a huge program for our Mission, taking up a huge amount of our time*". Another stated "*I only learn about our worker repatriations from Facebook. There is a disconnect from the people running the program*". Another Head of Mission complained: "*The welfare numbers are jumbled…the numbers are frustrating for me*".

[32] E.g. One diplomatic representative expressed concern that existing workers are deployed to meet arriving workers at the airport, believing this to be a role of PLF, and seemingly not understanding that the Deed obliges AEs (not PLF) to arrange for arriving workers to be met by appropriate means.

Cultural Competence

PLF has promoted cultural competence among Australia-based PALM stakeholders. The PALM scheme *Cultural Competency Framework* (undated) produced by PLF in collaboration with labour sending country diplomatic missions is a significant document, not only as a resource for stakeholders but more importantly in articulating expectations about the PALM scheme's approach to labour sending countries and their workers. A range of activities have been undertaken to socialise the Framework with AEs and community stakeholders, such as cultural competency sessions in Regional Accelerator Forums.

Several Pacific High Commissions expressed particular frustration with the flow of information about workers involved in critical incidents—a challenging situation which must be considered in light of worker rights under Australia's privacy legislation. The ability of PLF/DFAT/DEWR to identify critical incidents relies on AE reporting. The Approved Employer Deed and Guidelines requires that critical incidents are reported immediately, or at least within 24 hours. The relevant diplomatic mission is then sent a 'critical incident report' by DEWR which outlines details of the matter, but **only if the worker consents to their personal information being shared**. There are many instances when workers do not consent (e.g. if it relates to a sexual assault or pregnancy) and therefore PLF/DFAT/DEWR are unable to meet the mission's expectations. Further, worker welfare dialogue is generally between CLOs/LSUs and PLF's Worker Support Team, rather than directly with diplomatic Heads of Mission (HoM) as is appropriate given their differing responsibilities. This lack of sharing of personal information about workers involved in critical incidents due to privacy legislation can present as an intractable issue for diplomatic missions, several of which have been criticised in their home country for perceived tardiness of response.

All the HoMs that the evaluation team interviewed placed importance on the role of Country Liaison Officers (CLO) in supporting worker welfare, though these roles are currently under-resourced to respond to the approximate 40,000 workers distributed across the continent.[33] In respect of CLOs, PLF advise that as of October 2023, there were 14 (12.2 FTE) CLOs, of whom 8.2 FTEs were either wholly or partially funded by PLF. By January 2024 it is expected that the PLF will either wholly or partially fund 17 CLO FTEs. Three of the 14 current CLOs are female, which is roughly in line with the proportion of female workers in the PALM scheme (21%). In the recent Budget, the Australian Government committed to fund increased CLO numbers, including recruiting women CLOs. The CLOs provide a valuable culturally relevant support service for workers which appear to overlap in practice with some PLF responsibilities. A Pacific diplomat stated: "*CLOs are an amazing addition. They are so important to us. They work seven days per week. But the problem is our workers think the CLOs can fix everything*". Although CLOs do not have input into the policy space, they are a 'mandated party' in the Community of Care model and hence have significant influence and play a critical role in worker welfare.

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[33] There are diverse arrangements among sending countries for the employment and management of CLOs.

Overall, worker welfare poses significant risks to the scheme in Australia and in sending countries.[34] Most importantly, workers' mental and physical wellbeing should not be put at risk as a result of labour mobility participation. As it stands, DFAT and DEWR carry almost all risks associated with the scheme, and hence are exposed to criticisms by all parties. Empowering other stakeholders to share responsibility in line with natural incentives and accountabilities may enable a more balanced, sustainable, and cost-effective scheme. This is particularly the case in relation to worker welfare. Arguably, PLF has attempted to deliver support for citizens of another country that might otherwise be delivered as a form of 'consular services'. It is worth considering transferring more of the responsibility for worker support to the relevant overseas missions in Australia through an expanded CLO network. Arguably, support services could be delivered with greater cultural efficacy, and could mitigate criticisms of DFAT/DEWR/PLF by transferring more responsibility to the natural duty bearers of such services. This could be achieved by continuing to invest in the CLO network, including increasing the number of female CLOs.

Recommendation

1. DFAT should continue to resource through diplomatic missions in Australia an expanded gender equitable network of Country Liaison Officers commensurate with the number and distribution of workers.

2. DFAT/DEWR should commission a comprehensive review of the Community of Care model, including the delineation of roles between LSUs, AEs, CLO.

Worker reintegration

The third of the three drivers of risk in the PALM scheme concerns the reintegration of returning workers. PLF had planned to develop this aspect of worker support prior to the first cohorts of PLS workers starting to return home in 2020-21. This development work was side tracked due to having to reallocate resources to COVID-19 welfare responses and the scheme scale-up. A senior PLF team member stated:

> *"Initially a lot of focus was on supporting workers to be ready to come to Australia. Unfortunately, a planned new focus on reintegration didn't eventuate because of the shift in focus to welfare in-Australia".*

Arguably, the successful social and economic reintegration of workers underpins the whole 'development rationale' for labour mobility. Put another way, if no workers returned and there were no remittances to Pacific and Timorese communities, the PALM scheme would *only* be a labour migration scheme. In such circumstances, study of the amount of remittances and the nature of worker/household/community economic impact could be deemed paternalistic or even irrelevant. However, as it stands, the PALM scheme is not just a working visa scheme managed by the Department of Home Affairs, but rather it is at least partly managed under Australia's development assistance program, and hence is subject to all the usual safeguarding and policy priorities that entails. Arguably, this is because it sits within a wider geopolitical or strategic context which sees close engagement between Australia, PICs, and Timor-Leste as critical (see section 4.3). Ensuring and promoting the economic benefits of labour mobility is fundamental to assuring its social license in labour sending countries and in Australia.

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[34] In Australia, media coverage of worker welfare issues has created reputational harm for the PALM scheme. In labour sending countries, worker welfare issues risk eroding the social license for labour mobility. More broadly, these issues risk compromising people-to-people links—which is one key rationale for the scheme.

While studies by the World Bank and ANU[35] have established evidence of development impact in Pacific/Timorese households and communities[36], there are legitimate questions about whether increased expenditure *alone* adequately capitalises on the opportunities presented through labour mobility in terms of fostering sustainable development outcomes. It is a fact that PLF was not able to undertake planned work in relation to enabling returning workers with entrepreneurial ambitions to achieve their goals. Moving forward, there is a nuanced debate to be settled within DFAT between two arguments: i) workers have individual choice about how they spend their earnings, and hence the quantum of remittances and the nature of how those remittances are spent is of no concern to the Commonwealth; ii) remittances can be leveraged for more enduring economic impact at household, community, and national levels, and Australia's development assistance program could play a role in supporting an enabling environment for this leverage.

The concept note commissioned by DFAT for the next phase of support for the PALM scheme again prioritises support to worker reintegration. Such a focus could commence in the pre-departure phase with the setting of financial goals (this is a focus of the IOM/World Vision PDB discussed above). However, it should also be supported through skills development (in Australia and labour sending countries), access to capital and entrepreneurship guidance upon return. This is all complex and cost-intensive to implement and so must be planned from a strategic perspective. There is currently limited enterprise development by returning workers. Importantly, there is no significant investment by sending countries in an enabling environment for microenterprise. An LSU staff member reflected:

> *"People need support to best use their savings when they return…our government is not doing anything to help".*

In Vanuatu, the Australian High Commission provides a small amount of funding for V-Lab[37] which provides business planning support for returning workers, but there has been limited investment and engagement[38]. There are other DFAT initiatives across the Pacific that currently promote entrepreneurship that could be useful points of reference[39].

One further issue that was raised with the evaluation team is that there is rarely formal recognition of skills learned in Australia, which hampers employment prospects of workers on their return. Another issue is that some skills (e.g., meat processing) are not relevant in some Pacific islands contexts. Nonetheless, there are cases of workers applying knowledge and skills they acquired. For example, returning ni-Vanuatu workers have implemented improved banana production techniques on Mele to increase productivity and profitability—skills which they learned from working in Australian agriculture. The evaluation team notes ongoing work within the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) to prioritise labour mobility skills (see p 37) which could be further expanded. It is likely that more work could be done to integrate other bilateral and regional development investments to further leverage the development impact of labour mobility.

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[35] Doan, D., Dornan, M., Doyle, J. and Petrou, K. (2023). Migration and labor mobility from Pacific Island countries. Background paper for the World Development Report 2023: Migrants, refugees and societies. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/511bd7fb799a3379242b5c151b2a14d5-0050062023/original/WDR-Pacific-Islands-case-study-FORMATTED.pdf
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[36]Research suggests that the majority of returning workers invest in house renovations or construction once immediate needs, such as food and schooling, have been met.
[37] https://www.v-lab.org/
[38] Two out of 100 workers surveyed in PDB expressed interest in business rather than building a house or expenditure. Three out of 100 pre-departure workers returned to engage with V-lab.
[39] E.g. PHAMA Plus, Pacific Connect.

Clear Horizon

> ### Recommendation
>
> 3. The next phase of PLF should further prioritise ways to support employability and entrepreneurship among returning workers to leverage the development benefits of labour mobility.
>
> 4. DFAT Posts should explore ways to integrate/align upcoming Development Partnership Plans (DPP) with relevant strategies that leverage local PALM scheme priorities (e.g. skills development, entrepreneurship, employment incentives, government revenue).

A final aspect in relation to achievement of the three PLF EOPOs concerns sustainability[40]. The evaluation team was advised that the way sustainability was conceived in relation to the PALM scheme evolved over recent years.

A 2020 Independent Review of the PLF[41] commissioned by DFAT recommended the (then) PLS be underpinned by a market-driven approach in order to reduce reliance on finite federal government support. In response to the review findings, PLF and DFAT collaborated to produce *The Roadmap for Sustainability* (June 2021) which sets out a strategy to grow the scheme in a way that improved alignment between those who benefit from the scheme and those who pay for the scheme. Five key initiatives were implemented to promote a sustainable PALM scheme, each of which is discussed elsewhere in this report:

1. The **Community of Care** approach to worker welfare (see above).

2. A **regional structure** to support the Community of Care approach via 'on the ground' contact with AEs and community stakeholders (see section 4.2.2).

3. Development of **technology infrastructure** required to support large numbers of PALM scheme workers and operate the scheme efficiently within Australia and sending countries (see section 4.2.2).

4. Implementation of a **system-wide risk-based approach** to PLS in which resources are applied according to the level of identified risk. This approach was underpinned by PLF delineating compliance and assurance functions across different workstreams (see section 4.2.2).

5. **Building of LSU capacity** to manage increasing demands for labour mobility workers (see section 4.3).

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[40] N.B. Sustainability is a discrete criterion within DFAT's FIMR Validation Matrix comprising 5 sub-criteria. While the evaluation team was not explicitly tasked with assessing the sustainability criterion, it is briefly reviewed here in recognition that in development practice, sustainability considerations are fundamental in relation to outcome achievement.
[41] The Independent Review of the PLF was undertaken by Renee Leon.

The very rapid growth in worker numbers triggered by the Australian Government's 'Restart' (2020) and 'Doubling' announcements (2021) saw an increase in adverse impacts of labour mobility participation in both Australia and sending countries arising from workers' lengthy separation from families and communities (the number of critical incidents reported rose from 94 in FY2020-21 to 258 in FY2021-2022, a 274% increase)[42]. The management of such risks is critical to preserving the social license for the scheme in Australia and sending countries. Consequently, in recent years PLF re-framed sustainability to include the need to maintain social license for the scheme, and to successfully manage potential risks to social license. Analysis of critical incidents by PLF identified five worker-related risks to social licence in Australia: sexual and reproductive health,[43] respectful relationships,[44] mental health, alcohol, and safe driving. PLF supported AEs to respond to these and other worker-related risks. Management of these risks moving forward remains the fundamental priority of worker welfare support services.

<div style="background:#1F3864;color:white;padding:6px;">Measurability and plausibility of outcome statements</div>

The QTAG was not previously tasked with reviewing the PLF theory of change or EOPOs, and there is a compelling argument that at this point nearing the end of investment, there is little value in such critique[45]. However, there is an alternative argument that good development practice demands that a future design reflect lessons from this phase of PLF. In this vein, the phrasing of all three EOPO statements can be critiqued against DFAT's M&E standards[46] because they do not articulate human subjects/evaluands[47], presenting challenges from an evaluability standpoint.[48] The implicit subjects/evaluands of EOPO 1 and EOPO 2 are the LSUs and Approved Employers, respectively. EOPO 3 seems to set out the work of PLF (hence, is an output/deliverable rather than an outcome) but could also be interpreted to extend to Pacific labour ministries, Pacific/Timor-Leste Diplomatic Posts in Australia and a host of actors that comprise the Community of Care. Regardless, EOPO 3 is undefined, and EOPOs 1 and 2 are ambiguous.

The evaluation team was advised of current and ongoing steps by DFAT and DEWR to clarify the mandates and responsibilities of the departments in relation to the PALM scheme, and to clarify the various roles of key actors. This will enable formulation of a clear theory of change for the next phase of support to the PALM scheme.

On a related note, the evaluation team heard from multiple stakeholders[49] a sense of wrestling with the core purpose or emphasis of the PALM scheme broadly, and PLF specifically. Several interviewees reflected that the PALM scheme has two different strategic priorities, one that is Australia-facing and the other labour sending country-facing. On one hand, the scheme is a domestic employment program with the goal of filling specified unskilled and semi-skilled labour shortages ultimately for the benefit of the Australian economy. On the other hand, the scheme is a development program with the goal of contributing to family and community wellbeing in labour sending countries through worker remittances.

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[42] According to PLF supplied data, 49% concern behavioral incidents, 36% health-related, 13% employment-related.
[43] To address issues of consent and pregnancy.
[44] To address domestic and family violence, and gender-based violence among workers.
[45] Regardless, such critique is a key part of DFAT's FIMR validation process.
[46] Program theory is a technical speciality, and like other specialities, has conventions and norms which through time and experience have become established as ways to optimise success and clarity. DFAT's M&E standards continue to evolve in line with these conventions and norms.
[47] *Who* will be doing *what* differently by the end-of-investment?
[48] The evaluation team acknowledges that even technically sound EOPO statements may have become problematic due to the significant contextual and policy changes described elsewhere in this document, and in circumstances where it is challenging within DFAT to amend EOPOs during the life of a contract. The evaluation team also appreciates that the sentiments of the EOPOs were aligned with the original focus of the Australian Government notwithstanding the significant changes that later happened.
[49] DFAT staff, DEWR staff, regional diplomats, contractor staff.

Clear Horizon

While the scheme is underpinned by these differing policy aims, they are also inter-connected and must be implemented in a coordinated and proportionate fashion to be successful overall. The dominance or foundering in implementation of one aim will have consequences for the other aim, exposing the entire scheme to risk. Managing these dual aims has created points of tension at different stages, fostering dissatisfaction among some stakeholders. This is explored further below.

Partner and beneficiary satisfaction and behaviour change

As noted above, PLF has been highly flexible and responsive to the evolving needs and policy settings of DFAT and DEWR. It has proactively worked to support AEs, workers, LSUs, and a range of other stakeholders against the background of the dramatic contextual changes summarised in Section 2.3. A DFAT officer closely involved at key points during the PLF contract reported:

> *"PLF never had a clear 6 month run to prove itself. I can commend the PLF…staff were patient and understanding. They understood the politics, but never took their eyes off the ball on worker welfare…The leadership was fantastic at keeping the whole show focussed on bigger objectives. The facility managed onshore and offshore services well. They provided staff in the LSUs which helped them keep running…it seemed well joined up from what I could see".*

Given the diversity of interests across the classes of stakeholders, it is unsurprising that there are differing levels of satisfaction with PLF performance. The evaluation team observed that, in general, the more closely a stakeholder engaged with PLF, the more likely they were to respect the challenges and appreciate the performance of the facility. A DFAT official reflected the pragmatic reality that "*a perpetual challenge of this program is that everyone will always be a little bit unhappy; and if that's the case then we're probably doing our job right*".

The evaluation team engaged with most—but not all—classes of stakeholders. The following quotations from key classes of stakeholders are indicative of common themes in relation to PLF performance:

DFAT official: "PLF has been extraordinary throughout a really difficult time of flux and change… Collaboration has been a key success factor. DFAT and [the contractor] have managed PLF as a partnership…We were clear on being the final decision-maker, but they knew that they could bring ideas".

DEWR official: "PLF didn't seem to value the expertise in DEWR in relation to onshore operations. It's a different way of working compared with offshore engagement. They took a much more relationship-oriented approach rather than a compliance or enforcement approach which is consistent with onshore ways of working. PLF seemed more focused on offshore, and perhaps tried to apply the same ways of working onshore, but Australian employers operate in a very different context to the Pacific stakeholders. PLF was very collaborative, when perhaps enforcement was justified".

Australian industry representative: "[PLF staff] has done a great job. The support that DFAT has given to countries through PLF has been essential…Having PLF reps in each country has been critical but we need to sit down and work out everyone's roles. We need to improve communication between employers and sending countries".

LSU staff: "[PLF Engagement Manager] keeps me on my toes, reminding me about proper process and urgent priorities. Through them we have access to support from Australia…I appreciate the dynamics of how they work—their HR management style. They help to make issues we face more manageable".

Clear Horizon

Returned worker: "In predeparture briefings they show us all the support services, but most workers don't call those [Support Services Line] numbers because they don't feel confident to speak English on the phone or express their feelings. I don't know anyone that has called the helpline…it's even worse for female workers".

Country Liaison Officer: "PLF staff are very helpful and do a good job. They are very professional in the way they do their work. The number of Pacific staff in PLF has grown over the years which is good to see. The key benefit of PLF is that it isn't a government department, which means decision making is faster than DFAT and DEWR".

PLF has been required to build and maintain relationships with an array of stakeholders in Australia and in 10 countries which each have a legitimate expectation to be kept informed. This has been a challenging—if not impossible—task, if only because the efficient flow of information across the whole 'system' requires all parties to play their role, not just PLF. Figure 4 below depicts key classes of stakeholders with an expectation to be kept informed by PLF. In several cases (as reflected in the quotations above), interviewees expressed frustration with PLF, but this frequently derived from a misunderstanding about the role/mandate of the facility—for example conflating the SWP with the PLS, or an assumption that PLF has contractual authority over AEs or workers, or indeed misconceptions about DFAT's role *vis-à-vis* DEWR. A Pacific Island diplomat observed:

"There are two sides to everything, so we can't just say everything is PLF's fault. We need a clear set of mandates and responsibilities between PLF, DFAT, DEWR etc. Even officers within the program don't necessarily know who carries what responsibility".
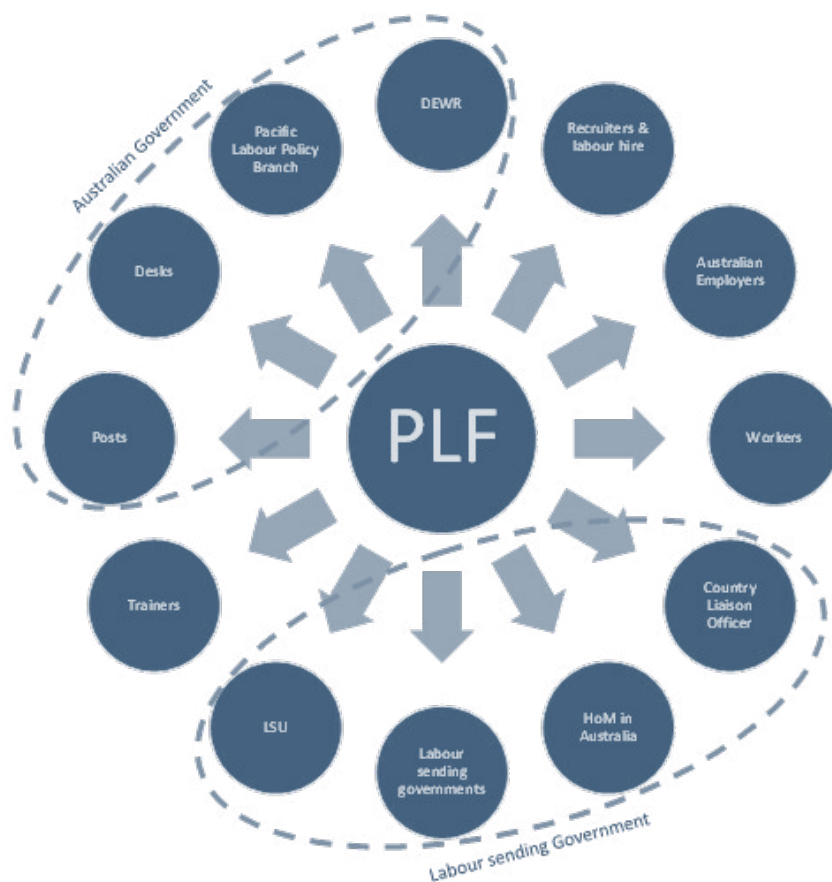

Figure 4: Key stakeholders with an expectation to be kept informed by PLF

Given the two MoG changes, it is timely for a document to be developed specifying the mandates and responsibilities of all PALM scheme stakeholders.

Recommendation

5. DFAT and DEWR should commission a process to broker and articulate understanding of mandates and responsibilities among all key PALM scheme stakeholders, including periodic review and update.

Responsiveness to additional priorities (including COVID-19 response)

This fourth sub-criterion for effectiveness was introduced to DFAT's FIMR validation matrix to reflect the impact of COVID-19 on Australia's development assistance program, and to address the evolution of program priorities that commonly occurs over the life of investments.

In the case of PLF, COVID-19 lock-downs had a dramatic impact on the work of DFAT and PLF (as described in section 2.3). A DFAT respondent stressed that the challenging and time-consuming work for PLF to bring in workers during the pandemic cannot be overstated. Further, PLF was especially impacted by the radical scale-up[50] in worker numbers that occurred following an announcement by Australia's then Prime Minister.[51] This meant significant increases in the number of approved employers, and the requirement or expectation of support services—which in turn necessitated a dramatic expansion in the number of staff required in PLF (an almost 20-fold increase).

In addition to the above changes (and as highlighted in section 2.3), PLF had to contend with MoG changes in Australia's administration of the scheme, a change in the Australian Government, and the impacts of bushfires and floods in communities where approved employers and workers are located.

Several interviewees lauded PLF staff for their responsiveness and professionalism amid contextual and policy changes imposed during the pandemic.

DFAT officer: "COVID was a challenge. There were seasonal worker programme workers in country that should have gone home. PLF welfare staff bent over backwards to support these workers. The PLF contract said words to the effect of 'assist with SWP as required'. But the PLF staff did a fantastic job working out where the workers could go once the fruit picking had finished but while borders were closed. I'm very positive about PLF's role in all that".

Pacific Head of Mission in Australia: "During COVID there was so much change. The numbers built up so quickly. We had about 2000 workers here. PLF must be complimented on how they worked hard during that time to redeploy people and keep them in jobs while they awaited repatriation".

Pacific Head of Mission in Australia: "During COVID there were no flights. PLF worked closely with us to facilitate charter flights for repatriation of workers, and to bring workers".

Returned worker: "During COVID when we didn't have work, PLF arranged Woolworths vouchers for us. They put us in touch with churches for support. Some of us were redeployed to new jobs".

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[50] N.B. It was always intended that the PALM scheme would scale-up, but that this would happen incrementally rather than dramatically.

[51] https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/pacific-work-ready-numbers-double-ahead-australias-harvest-season

Clear Horizon

The evaluation team concluded that there is strong evidence of PLF's responsiveness to additional priorities.

<div style="background-color:#1a3a5c;color:white;padding:8px;">Adequacy of policy dialogue and influence on development</div>

DFAT is currently selecting and deploying Australia-based staff in DFAT posts in the labour sending countries to support more strategic engagement directly by the Australian Government with LSUs and partner governments.[52] The importance of this strategic engagement was noted by a PLF senior manager:

> *"We need more senior level engagement by DFAT in sending countries. PLF now has an Engagement Manager embedded in each LSU who works closely with the Director and engages with the relevant Permanent Secretary, but they don't tend to have relationships within anyone more senior in government. Funding decisions and policy decisions are made by these senior people".*

A senior government official from a labour sending country also affirmed the need for more strategic government-to-government engagement: "*The two countries each have responsibilities. We should engage in a bilateral labour mobility agreement*". There is also scope to further integrate labour mobility into existing and new bilateral programming.

It is evident that labour mobility offers the Commonwealth significant strategic potential. It is highly regarded by Pacific citizens.[53] Many interviewees observed that securing an opportunity in labour mobility is highly desirable. A PLF staff member reported that in Timor-Leste, the LSU received over 55,000 applications within two weeks of opening the process. For this reason, and for national revenue reasons[54], it is seen by Pacific governments as a critical policy domain. In one country visited for this evaluation, a government staff member reflected:

> *"Everyone in [country] wants to do labour mobility. It's all people talk about in the markets and [kava houses]. It's even mentioned by politicians in campaigns to secure votes".*

Each sending country is progressively evolving its priorities for labour mobility including: focusing on short-term or longer-term deployments; lower or more highly skilled workers; numbers of workers sent; matters in relation to government revenue; policies to support investment and micro-enterprise by returning workers; and strategic workforce development issues (especially in critical areas such as health and education). Decision-making also includes consideration of adverse impacts associated with labour mobility being experienced by sending countries such as family separation, skill drain, and financial abuse/misuse.

Given sending countries' evolving priorities, the new strategic labour mobility engagement role in Posts is a timely development. This role, together with increased integration of labour mobility into existing and new bilateral programming will significantly enhance Australia's contribution as a labour mobility partner.

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[52] Funding for these positions was secured in the Federal Budget 2023-24.
[53] A PLF staff member reported that in Timor-Leste, the LSU received over 55,000 applications within two weeks of opening a recruitment process.
[54] Reportedly, around 5% of Vanuatu GDP derives from labour mobility.

Clear Horizon

Recommendation

6. DFAT should continue to proactively engage in strategic bilateral dialogue and programming with partner countries in support of their national labour mobility policy, strategy, and governance.

4.2.2. Efficiency

The following discussion is structured against DFAT's five FIMR sub-criteria for efficiency.

Appropriateness of time and resources used, and budget deviation

The classical definition of efficiency in project management concerns *actual* achievements relative to *planned* cost and time schedules.[55] Such an assessment is challenging—if not simplistic—in circumstances where the PLF design and various work plans and strategies were overtaken by contextual and policy changes and dramatic growth in labour mobility. A DEWR official noted:

> *"It's hard to measure success because the context has changed so much. The value [of the contractor] has been in the quality of services they've provided, but at significant cost. Costs have grown significantly over the contract".*

The increase in PLF costs noted in the quote above corresponded to the growth of the scheme. Contract amendments were each approved by government officials, justified by the additional resources required to respond to growth, and/or changes in PLF's scope of work. Over the life of this investment there were six contract amendments (with a seventh underway at the time of this evaluation). The contract amendments spanned budget increases from AUD 50 million at PLF's inception to a current total of AUD 127,501,134, representing a 155% budget increase against the backdrop of a 15,000% increase in the number of workers and a substantial contribution to both Australia's and labour sending country economic activity.

In the context of DFAT's FIMR validation process, multiple contract amendments accompanied by significant budget variation may be indicative of inefficiencies in planning or execution, but this assumes a stable operating context. In contrast, contract amendments and budget variations in highly dynamic circumstances can indicate responsiveness and adaptation necessary to maintain performance and quality. The evaluation team formed the view that this latter perspective was relevant in this evaluation.

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[55] https://projectmanagementacademy.net/resources/blog/improve-project-efficiency/#:~:text=What%20is%20Project%20Efficiency%3F,%2C%20cost%2C%20and%20schedule%20constraints.

Clear Horizon

Much of the budget growth was required to support additional staff, which grew from around 10 in early 2019 to over 190 staff. In particular, significant additional resources were required to support labour sending governments to meet demands under both SWP and PLS. Whole new teams were engaged to respond to an expanding role, most notably the Australia Engagement through regionally based teams to enable worker support and industry engagement. Increases in scope necessitated the establishment— and near constant evolution—of a large corporate structure spanning 8 'workstreams' (i.e. sub-teams or divisions). New workstreams were added progressively as needed, conferring value-for-money to the Commonwealth. This was especially notable in relation to the establishment of separate workstreams to address AE compliance and assurance. Many stakeholders conveyed to the evaluation team admiration for PLF's adaptiveness and diligence under these circumstances. Multiple PLF team members expressed pride in their consistent focus on quality work, and on learning and improvement in response to contextual changes.

While development program management is rarely flawless, the evaluation team concluded that in the main, PLF made appropriate use of time and resources at each point in the evolution of labour mobility.

Comparative value of the modality

This second FIMR sub-criterion under efficiency concerns the merit of the modality in relation to supporting achievement of the purpose of the investment. In the case of PLF, the evaluation team's judgment is that the way PLF operated was a good fit for the rapidly evolving needs and priorities of the Australian and labour sending governments.

PLF was designed as a 'facility', however, it is debatable if this is the correct nomenclature in practice. A DFAT officer noted:

> "*I'm unclear why this is a facility because we've known what we want to do: grow the program, make sure the right workers are involved, and ensure social benefits for participants*".

Clear Horizon

DFAT's guidance on facilities requires clearly articulated end-of-facility outcomes but accepts ambiguity about the pathway to achieve these. A key feature of facilities is a large amount of unallocated funds which are implemented on a year-to-year basis, often involving an array of partners or grantees. DFAT's International Development Programming Guide (p 39)[56] sets out the principal aid investment options. It seems that in practice, the PLF modality was more closely aligned with a 'program-based approach', delivered by a managing contractor, involving experts and technical advice engaged through a procurement agreement. PLF staff responded that perhaps DFAT's guidance should be updated to reflected a role for 'support facilities'.

Notwithstanding the definitional issue, there were diverse views about the comparative value of the PLF modality. As discussed in Section 3.2.1 (in relation to effectiveness), many stakeholders lauded PLF's responsiveness and flexibility.

Some Pacific Heads of Mission (HoM) in Australia expressed concern about the Australian Government engaging a managing contractor, which was perceived to impede the bilateral relationship. One HoM in particular expressed a perspective that a managing contractor negatively affected government-to-government communication and coordination. [57] In this context, the decision to in-source service delivery in DEWR has been applauded by some stakeholders because it puts diplomatic missions in direct contact with the Commonwealth.

Some DEWR stakeholders expressed the view that the contractor was constrained in its ability to undertake the breadth of responsibilities required:

> *"I found the public service had better processes and demonstrated more courage to correct things than the facility…they [PLF] took more of a relationship approach when enforcement was justified".*

This observation may reflect more on ways of working than of the modality *per se*. However, a review of the original PLF design document confirmed that an early intention was for PLF to take deliberate steps away from pure compliance and enforcement towards assurance and relationship management in relation to AEs. PLF staff further responded that they were required to navigate a balanced approach to assuring AEs were capacitated to meet the requirements of the Deed, but nonetheless also undertook enforcement action when required, as illustrated by the fact that 42% of worker pay and condition reviews undertaken by PLF resulted in back payments by AEs.

Beyond the functions of the contractor, one DEWR officer questioned the merits of the specific contract terms:

> *"I felt the contract wasn't future proofed. While no one could have anticipated the growth or the alignment of the two labour schemes [PLS and SWP], it still wasn't a great deed between the Commonwealth and the contractor. Whatever the model is next time, we need a more sophisticated contract with more opportunities to review".*

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[56] https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/international-development-programming-guide
[57] The context of this comment reflected on the modality of a contracted facility rather than on the performance of PLF specifically.

Clear Horizon

In contrast, most DFAT interviewees expressed positive views about the modality broadly, and the contractor's performance specifically, e.g.:

> *"An external contractor is much more flexible than what DFAT could be…there have been a lot of changes in labour migration policy…in retrospect the massive growth was well managed…DFAT and PLF worked in partnership, and they helped us to wrestle issues that arose".*

The positive sentiments above were echoed by others who recognised the challenges of having to understand Australian labour market issues while also responding to labour sending country capacity constraints in culturally appropriate ways, and generally being responsive to dramatic changes in Australian policy and context. The evaluation team formed the view that regardless of definitional debate about the form of the modality, the way PLF operated supported the rapidly evolving needs and priorities and the Australian and labour sending governments. Concerns about the broader rationale of the Australian Government in contracting a service provider may derive from not understanding the pragmatic reality of DFAT's contractor-led business model—noting that DFAT does not generally implement programs directly.

Adequacy of governance and management arrangements

An assessment of the merit of the governance arrangements for PLF was not within the scope of this evaluation, particularly in relation to Australian Government changes between DFAT and DEWR, or in relation to the political realm with engagement between the Australian Government and labour sending governments. However, the evaluation team considered key aspects of PLF's management arrangements and the extent to which they promoted efficiency in relation to the purpose of PLF.

As discussion in section 4.2.1, a key finding of this evaluation was in relation to PLF's responsiveness to contextual and policy changes. This was underpinned by a dynamic management model that was engaged in constant change management, As noted above, the organisation grew from around 10 staff at inception to over 190 staff working through eight 'work streams':

- Pacific and Timor-Leste Engagement
- Worker and Employer Support Services
- Australia Engagement
- Quality, Learning and Performance (QLP)
- Information Technology
- Communications
- Assurance
- Operations

These workstreams were added progressively in step with changes in demand and were staffed systematically by appropriately qualified individuals (see below)—essentially a just-in-time approach to growth and recruitment. The organisation was led by a lean and stable senior management team. Each workstream had its own structure that addressed the priorities of that workstream but was obliged to collaborate with other workstreams, and to actively participate in organisation-wide reflection and learning exercises. The QLP team played a critical role in driving this cross-functional collaboration.

Clear Horizon

Several interviewees, including foreign diplomatic staff and officials in labour sending governments, appreciated the increasing representation of Pacific Islanders among PLF staff positions. Others acknowledged the culture of reflection and learning that was considered a feature of the way PLF was managed and core to maintaining relevance and efficiency.

Interviewees cited particular structures or initiatives that were established by PLF and were observed to contribute significantly to the efficiency of PALM scheme operations. One example was the PLF Engagement Managers positioned within LSUs to provide capacity building, to broker engagement with Australia-based stakeholders, and to provide critical capacity substitution that ensured LSUs met the growing labour supply demands. An engagement team member observed: *"we act as a shock absorber between the LSU and the AEs. We work to facilitate the best outcomes"*. Numerous interviewees concurred that these roles have been key to achieving the growth agenda, and hence have contributed significantly to the efficiency of the scheme.

Although not an initiative of the PLF *per se,* Vanuatu has adopted a unique arrangement which LSU staff indicated has enabled them to achieve higher efficiencies in terms of the highest number of workers in the PALM scheme. The arrangements involve a partial outsourcing of recruitment to over 70 commercial/licensed recruitment agents. The LSU also directly processes some (about 20%) recruitments. While this model has enabled significant growth of the scheme it has been challenging for other reasons, including absence of a clear policy to regulate agents (in progress); conflict arising from LSU recruitments essentially competing with commercial agents; and perceptions that 'commercial information' is required from agents for the new In-country Recruitment Database (IRD). Vanuatu LSU staff argued that on balance, the recruitment agent model has fostered higher efficiency.

A further initiative that increased the efficiency of PLF operations was the establishment of the Community of Care model. The stated purpose of introducing this model was to increase the efficiency of worker welfare support beyond the intensive approach which had become unsustainable in the growing scheme. By delegating responsibilities to a range of stakeholders, support services could be delivered on a more scalable basis to a larger number of workers. A senior PLF manager set out the rationale:

> *"With growth, the worker support team model became unviable…we had to ask ourselves what is the responsibility of PLF versus the responsibility of employers versus the responsibility of workers? How do you go from providing direct hands-on support for workers but still providing care? The situation led us to adopt an escalation process and the 'Community of Care' approach.*

A DFAT official observed that:

> *"When I started in the role, PLF was still taking a 'hands-on' approach to worker welfare…worker numbers were small and intense support worked well but was costly. I can't fault the people who designed the facility that way. It was appropriate at the time, but everyone realised it wasn't sustainable at scale".*

However, as discussed in Section 3.2.1 (in relation to achievement of EOPO 3), some stakeholders (especially diplomatic missions in Australia) voiced concerns that the efficiency gains may have come at some cost to the effectiveness of worker support, with workers seemingly reticent to engage with the Support Services Line and other frontline services provided. This is one of several examples of PLF having to balance inherent tensions in performance expectations.

The evaluation team noted indications that some management arrangements may have eroded efficiency, though there was not strong evidence. For example, some CLOs questioned if there are overlaps between their role and the PLF Regional Engagement Managers in terms of the delivery frontline support to workers.

As reflected in earlier discussion in this report, there is widespread appreciation for the professionalism and skill among PLF staff—arguably a major contributor to implementation efficiency and effectiveness. A DFAT officer reported that "*PLF had a good team. They were committed and brought good experience, including from beyond the aid program. During COVID we put them through a lot*". Such comments clearly relate to technical and operational capability, however a DFAT official also acknowledged strategic support for the Australian Government:

> "*DFAT sees value in the advisory support provided by PLF. We have tasked them with coming up with policy inputs and undertaking substantive evaluations and research… [senior PLF staff] would proactively advise us of emerging issues in labour sending countries and recommend actions. We appreciate contractors playing an influencing role*".

Although less supportive of the contractor modality more broadly, DEWR staff also acknowledged PLF staff skill and experience:

> "*[The contractor] has been very engaged…There are lots of strengths and capabilities that the Australian Public Service doesn't have. Cultural awareness among PLF staff is greater than in DEWR. PLF have also done a great job with IT development… PLF did a very good job on the domestic side given their lack of experience domestically…I think PLF did a lot more than what I was aware of in terms of scope of work*".

The evaluation team observed clear passion and commitment to labour mobility among PLF staff and noted that many keenly feel the responsibility for the scheme's success. A PLF staff reflected: "*If [labour mobility] is done well it positively impacts many people. But if not done well, the negative impacts are major*". It is also evident that there are many technically—and politically—challenging functions led by PLF staff. One PLF staff posted in a labour sending country acknowledged:

> "*At times it's good having PLF colleagues in other countries doing similar work. I wouldn't get through some weeks if I didn't have colleagues experiencing similar challenges. It's difficult to be charged with responsibility from Australia to make certain things happen in [country] while not actually having any authority to make it happen. Everything we achieve is through negotiation and relationships*".

Interviews with LSU staff in multiple countries highlighted the high regard for PLF staff—both in-country and in Australia. The positive sentiments were corroborated by a senior labour sending country government official: "*I feel PLF has been doing well. Everyone faces challenges but a change in the [support arrangements] would really impact the program*".

The evaluation team formed a view that integration with—and strengthening of—partner systems has been a strength of PLF's way of working.

For example, since the PLS was rolled into the PALM scheme, PLF's Assurance Team has worked essentially as an extension of DEWR officers to ensure AEs comply with the deed and guidelines, but with an emphasis on working with employers to rectify issues by providing education and support. A PLF staff described this as:

> "[PLF's] Assurance Team includes broad HR, IR and auditing experience so is able to identify issues with employers. But whereas DEWR is the 'cop', the Assurance Team is both 'cop' and 'coach'…the team generally gets a positive response from employers because they come from a base of education and strengthening their systems".

Perhaps the most visible example of PLF working within partner systems involves PLF staff[58] embedded in LSUs. One of these staff members described their role:

> "I physically sit between two PALM team leaders in the LSU. It's a mentoring role. I sit behind the scenes about 70% of the time…I don't think people think of themselves as government staff or PLF staff. We're all just 'LSU'. We all work for labour mobility".

The strengthening of LSU capacity is further discussed in Section 3.3 below.

Another high-profile aspect of partner system strengthening with a clear focus on improved efficiency has been the development of information systems: PALM Information System (PALMIS) linking Australia-based and sending country-based data, and the In-country Recruitment Database (IRD). This has been a major undertaking by PLF which was being rolled out at the time of this evaluation but was widely appreciated by DEWR, DFAT and especially LSU staff:

> "Data management is increasingly a strength of the LSU. Previously we had no database, just boxes and boxes of registration papers. The IRD is still a challenge, but we get lots and lots of requests for data from Ministers and others…once everyone is using the database it will be easier to respond to these requests".

A DFAT official noted that:

> "The development of PALMIS should greatly improve efficiency—and make scheme more demand driven by enabling integration of employers and the LSUs".

The IRD has been built with a clear focus on national ownership and management. The system architecture is built on an open-source platform to contain maintenance costs and promote local agency. The system functionality is customisable to accommodate local use cases.

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[58] Pacific Engagement Managers, Program Managers and QLP Managers.

In terms of donor harmonisation, there is evidence of cooperation with New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme. In a practical sense, the PLF Engagement Managers/Program Managers do not differentiate between LSU staff supporting PALM scheme and LSU staff supporting RSE. The evaluation team was also advised that the RSE has expressed an intention to adopt the IRD, which should further improve LSU efficiency[59]. That said, it is likely that more could be done to harmonise with, and learn from, other country experiences with labour mobility. One Pacific diplomat stated:

> *"I don't know how many reviews have been done over the past 9 years. There must already be recommendations on how to improve the system. What can be learned from New Zealand or the Philippines?"*

A further interpretation of harmonisation involves DFAT's Education and Integration Branch, which is engaging with some of the long-term systemic issues arising from labour mobility. Although beyond the scope of PLF's mandate, it is mentioned here as relevant to the PALM scheme broadly, and in recognition that PLF collaborated constructively with other DFAT programs within this domain.

A strategic issue recognised by many stakeholders concerns ways to respond to PIC concerns about 'skills drain' triggered by labour mobility and other drivers; and also enabling PALM scheme workers to benefit from training and qualification processes that may promote employment or enterprise upon their return. The main modalities for this support are:

- The **Australia Pacific Training Coalition** (APTC)[60] which invests around AUD 25 million per year and produces about 1,000 graduates annually with full Australian accredited qualifications in addition to non-accredited short courses and micro credentials.
- The **University of South Pacific** which is governed by 12 PICs and receives core funding from Australia of around AUD 14 million per year and supports around 30,000 university enrolments and 5,000 TAFE Pacific enrolments per year from across the region.

DFAT staff acknowledged, notwithstanding the substantive nature of this support, that it represents a long-term investment that will take time to accrue impact on skill shortages raised by partner governments.

4.3. Effectiveness of support to sending countries

In this section we present findings in relation to the evaluation's second line of inquiry, concerned with PLF support for labour sending countries—predominantly invested through LSUs. The findings are based on stakeholder perspectives, the evaluation team's visits to Kiribati, Vanuatu and Tonga, and LSUs' self-assessments of their capacity development.

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[59] N.B. The evaluation team did not engage directly with New Zealand's Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFAT) to confirm perspectives on harmonisation and coordination.
[60] https://aptc.edu.au/

Clear Horizon

Labour Sending Units are located within various ministries in labour sending countries. Their function is to recruit and prepare potential labour mobility workers and facilitate the movement of workers to receiving countries. There is diversity across labour sending countries in relation to the size, capacity and functions of individual LSUs, but they all remain under the auspices of sending governments. This diversity is illustrated in the countries visited by the evaluation team. For example, the Tongan LSU undertakes all of the functions associated with worker mobilisation, whereas the I-Kiribati LSU outsources PDB to a local TVET provider; the I-Kiribati LSU has 33 years of combined labour mobility experience among its staff, whereas the Tongan LSU has ongoing staff turnover.

The LSUs have been a focus of capacity building by the Australian Government—initially under the Labour Mobility Assistance Program (LMAP), and continuing under PLF. The aim of these capacity-building efforts is described in an intermediate outcome in the PALM scheme logic: 'LSUs adopt policies and practices that can sustain successful labour mobility'.

LSUs are widely acknowledged as being critical to the scheme and in that context, the support provided by DFAT/PLF through capacity-building activities has been fundamental. There is widespread acknowledgement of the value of the work done by PLF in supporting LSUs, especially during the pandemic to relieve the pressure associated with large mobilisations. A representative of Australian employers stated:

> *"The support that DFAT has given countries is essential for us. Labour mobility in sending countries is growing at such a rate they can't keep up without support…PLF play an essential role".*

There have been two major constraints to PLF's capacity development efforts. Firstly, PLF has had to undertake capacity building according to the LSU's priorities and at the LSU's pace. Secondly, the rapid increase in worker numbers has necessitated capacity substitution. Put simply, the bandwidth for capacity building in LSUs has been overtaken by the priority to get large numbers of workers on planes.

Clear Horizon

Many stakeholders consider that LSU capacity has improved—including LSU staff themselves as reflected in the results of the LSU capacity self assessments that involve a questionnaire developed by the PLF.[61] Individual LSUs are supported by PLF staff in a reflective workshop to discuss their responses which are then analysed by PLF and compared with earlier self-assessments.[62] The results show that LSUs rate their capacity as having increased since 2018/19 (noting that ratings plateaued between 2021 and 2023 reflecting the demands of rapid worker growth on LSUs during that time). The most significant increases in capacity were identified in LSU operations, and communication and outreach. The smallest increase was in the area of GEDSI. A senior PLF staff reflected that "*I would not have believed six years ago that Timor and Pacific LSUs would be using an integrated database to manage the number of workers and employers that we are now seeing*". An LSU staff reported:

> "*The program has grown a lot…I'm proud that we've managed the growth. When I started three years ago, we were based in a small run-down room, facilitating training in a carpark for 70 to 80 participants…We've seen improvements in the quality of our work. Since PLF, we have a lot of programs beyond just getting people on the plane…there were only three or four staff just three years ago, and we all just did everything…now we have five or six times the number of staff and we've established a structure…it's a major change*".

Nevertheless, other stakeholders questioned the efficacy of capacity-building efforts; for example, an Australian employer representative commented: "*LSU capacity has improved over time, but not enough. It's not possible, in my humble opinion, for countries to respond to industry demand. What plan does DFAT have to scale up?*"

Central to most of the critique about support for LSUs is an expectation that they should meet Australian demand for workers independently of Australian support—an assumption of 'sustainability' premised on LSUs being resourced and operated independently of Australian investment. Certainly, most interviewees, including LSU staff and PLF staff, agreed that LSUs are not yet at a stage where they can meet current and projected demand without support from Australia. Further, LSUs are not uniform, but operate in unique bureaucratic contexts within their own government structures. A PLF staff observed:

> "*The LSUs are a 'mixed bag' across the region. Every country is at a different stage…I can see LSUs will still be needing support in the next two to three years…Our intention was to do ourselves out of a job. We developed a 'sustainability road map'. Many staff now have good qualifications. We supported LSUs to put budgets up the line. We've worked to lift LSU profiles within their own governments…but COVID changed the parameters*".

The evaluation team explored the key drivers and constraints to sustainable LSU capacity using a conceptual framework from the literature on institutional change—the 'equation for change'.[63] This framework considers that enduring capacity within an organisation is contingent on six pre-conditions or domains. These domains recognise that in development assistance there tends to be a predominant focus on skills transfer, and yet there are a range of other factors that underpin sustainable capacity:

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[61] LSU capacity self-assessment results 2023.

[62] LSU capacity self-assessments have occurred in 2019, 2021 and 2023. The questionnaire covers LSU structure, leadership and resourcing; circular labour mobility policy and planning frameworks and stakeholder engagement; LSU operations; data and knowledge management; communications and outreach; and GEDSI.

[63] N.B. the evaluation team also reviewed the findings of PLF's bespoke LSU capacity self-assessments which have yielded valuable context-specific insights. The additional value of this generic institutional change framework enabled a broader interpretation of key challenges and achievements in relation to LSU capacity. There is value in both frameworks.

Strategy: are LSU staff backed by clear leadership vision/direction and authority to perform their functions?

People: are sufficient LSU staff committed by partner Government to perform required functions, and meet growth expectations? Are equality and inclusion considerations adequately addressed in staffing?

Skills: do LSU staff possess the required technical, managerial, and interpersonal skills required to perform to expectation? Are they supported to develop skills that are not yet adequate? Are they positioned to respond to emerging skill requirements?

Incentives: do LSU staff encounter conflicting priorities or agenda? What explicit and implicit factors motivate strong performance of core functions? Are LSU staff adequately remunerated?

Systems: Do policies and procedures clearly enable strong LSU performance? Are adequate tools and systems established? Are managerial arrangements between PLF, labour sending Government and Australian stakeholders unambiguous?

Resources: Do LSUs receive sufficient and reliable resources from counterpart Governments to perform to current expectations and future growth? To what extent are LSUs dependent on PLF resourcing?
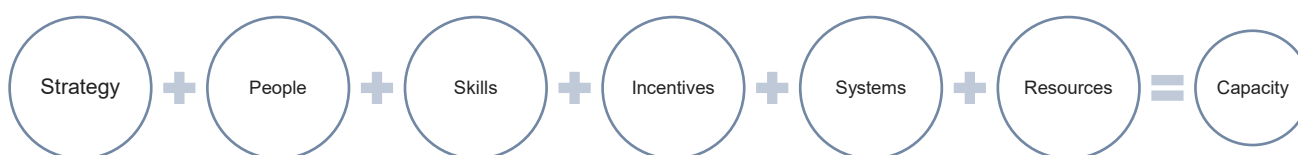
Strategy **+** People **+** Skills **+** Incentives **+** Systems **+** Resources **=** Capacity

Figure 5: 'Equation for change'' defining building blocks or pre-conditions for sustainable LSU capacity
The evaluation team used the equation for change to inform evaluation questions and to analyse interview responses. The following table summarises the team's high-level findings against this framework.

Domain	Key findings/status
Strategy	- Diverse and evolving labour mobility priorities across PTL - In some countries, tension between ministries in relation to labour mobility mandate - High turnover in relevant ministers and permanent secretaries - Departmental directors have significant influence over LSU direction and operations, but limited influence in PTL government contexts—despite high profile of labour mobility - Limited vision/investment in worker reintegration and economic engagement
People	- Some LSUs have stable staffing (e.g. Kiribati), whereas others (e.g. Tonga) suffer from ongoing staff churn - Growth of scheme has left LSU under-resourced, especially during peak recruitment periods - Steps underway to formalise LSU staff in public service, but currently heavily subsidised by PLF
Skills	- High calibre of staff, though frequently coming from public service without HR skills required for recruitment - Significant training and ongoing mentoring invested by PLF - LSU staff report adequate skills and growing confidence [Timor-Leste] Language difficulties - General agreement that PLF capacity support required for several years

Clear Horizon

Incentives	• Labour mobility in strong demand among PTL citizens, creating status for LSU staff • Labour mobility high priority for PTL governments • Training and travel opportunities incentivise LSU staff
Systems	• Documentation of PALM scheme processes and procedures • IRD and PALMIS intended to dramatically improve operational efficiency • Formalised systems of PDB training • Weak knowledge/linkages between LSU and DEWR • Role and system to support reintegration of workers undeveloped
Resources	• Labour sending country interest in labour mobility is not backed up with reliable resourcing of LSU • No LSUs have their own budget line • Significant proportion of staff and operating expenses carried by PLF, including critical office equipment

The implications of the above assessment are that while some further support for skills and systems consolidation will be required in the next phase of DFAT funding, there is need for broader support to labour sending governments to evolve their own unique vision/strategy for labour mobility and the resourcing of this strategy.

As noted, the rapid scale-up of PALM scheme workers has eroded the original ambition for LSUs to operate independently of PLF. In the case of Vanuatu, LSU staff numbers increased almost four-fold, with half continuing to be paid by PLF. There was virtual consensus among interviewees that LSUs would not yet be able to operate unsupported at the required intensity. a senior PLF team member reflected:

> *"DFAT is propping up the LSUs. As soon as Australia doubled worker numbers during COVID, we had to increase funding for LSUs. The early idea had been for PLF to do itself out of a job…that there should be no DFAT subsidy for LSU operations…a 'Sustainability Roadmap' foresaw a decline in Australia's support for sending countries…we haven't been able to because of the operational demands".*

Beyond the skills and systems necessary for LSUs to independently meet the demands of the PALM scheme, is the matter of resourcing. PLF has invested significantly in LSU payroll, equipment, travel, and office fit-out. In Vanuatu, a stakeholder in Vanuatu reported:

> *"PLF built a whole dedicated office building, including fencing, car park and furnishing…previously we were operating down in town in dilapidated offices, conducting training in a car park".*

This investment by PLF is in circumstances where none of the labour sending governments are yet allocating budget for PLF, and many PLF staff are not yet recognised public servants. However, the evaluation team heard arguments that the LSUs are not a normal part of PTL government bureaucracy—rather they are an artefact of Australian industry labour shortages. Hence, it is unreasonable to expect fiscally constrained governments to bear the costs. This is essentially an argument for 'user pays'. But, to follow this argument, who is the user in this case? Is it Australian employers (who cover the upfront costs for workers, subsequently deducted from workers' wages)? Is it workers themselves (often from limited asset/unemployed contexts)? Or is it Australian taxpayers (via DFAT/DEWR)? Predictably, views about this differ depending on standpoint. An Australian employer reflected:

Clear Horizon

Clearly the issue of 'LSU sustainability' sits within a wider strategic context that demands more nuanced debate. As discussed earlier, it is too simplistic to see labour mobility only as a development investment with the usual expectations of sustainable capacity transfer to a recipient country. But equally, it is too simplistic to approach this as just a migrant labour scheme. The wider geopolitics demands that the Australian Government position itself as a 'partner of choice' in the region. There is now widespread acknowledgement of the political importance of the scheme to Australia. This extends to demonstrating to partner countries the value of remittances, skill development and people-to-people links that arise from labour mobility. There is also recognition that the revenue generated in regional areas of Australia is substantial, including as income for local churches and organisations. And all of this sits against the backdrop of economics in Australia which has demonstrated the difficulty of recruiting sufficient workers to fill roles that labour mobility workers successfully fill. In short, Australia needs the PALM scheme to be successful as much as the labour sending countries. Hence, 'sustainability' in the broadest sense of the PALM scheme is contingent on:

- LSU skill and resources (supported from any source).
- Continuing willingness of workers/communities to participate in labour mobility (notwithstanding growing worker welfare concerns and visa limitations).
- Continuing willingness of Australian employers to hire Pacific/Timorese workers (noting the implications of the PALM scheme deed and guidelines).[64] [65]
- Continuing commitment from sending country governments.
- Social license for the scheme in Australia and sending countries.

4.4. Appropriateness and utility of MEL arrangements

It is a truism that the more complex a program, and the more dynamic the context, the more critical the MEL arrangements are for ensuring ongoing relevance, effectiveness and efficiency. As set out in Section 2.3 and throughout this report, PLF has had to accommodate a high degree of complexity and dynamism. In this context, the overall view of the evaluation team is that PLF have demonstrated a high standard of MEL practice, enabling well-informed reporting to the Australian Government and continuous improvement within PLF.

The general sentiments amongst key stakeholders with knowledge of PLF's MEL work is positive. As noted elsewhere in this report, PLF's responsiveness was especially appreciated by DFAT stakeholders, and in many cases this feedback pertained to MEL data and research. That said, within the dynamic context, DFAT has struggled at times to articulate its expectations in relation to MEL. A senior PLF staff observed:

"DFAT's capacity to engage with MEL that meets DFAT's own standards has been challenging. But at times there has been nothing better than having a DFAT counterpart who values data".

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[64] https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/resources/palm-scheme-approved-employer-deed-agreement; https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/search?combine=Approved+Employer+Guidelines
[65] Stakeholder interviews indicated significant industry concerns with changes to the PALM scheme deed and guidelines, particularly related to new minimum requirements for hours of work under the short-term scheme, which they argue will dampen demand for Pacific and Timor-Leste workers.

Clear Horizon

Within the PLF organisational structure MEL was managed by the Quality, Learning and Performance (QLP) team. At the time of this evaluation, this team is led by two sub-contracted specialists[66] who oversee MEL operations and research. One of these specialists has line responsibility for two QLP managers located in Tonga and Fiji, and three coordinators (Vanuatu, Samoa and Timor-Leste)[67]. In addition, the GEDSI team (two specialists) is part of the QLP team, which is widely seen as a strength. A PLF team member observed:

> *"It's a big advantage having GEDSI in the QLP team. It has influenced MEL tool development. There are so many examples of our work influencing the GEDSI team…and GEDSI thinking coming into research work…it was a major success having the joint structure".*

The GEDSI advisers concurred:

> *"We have great leadership support from all of the PLF leads. QLP does a lot to raise awareness through performance measurement. We've introduced annual GEDSI targets and a range of GEDSI measures in the MEL arrangements".*

The MEL work has been adequately resourced, with an annual budget of around AUD 800,000 per year (which corresponds to approximately 3 – 4% of investment budget[68]). This budget has been expended on staff and a range of MEL products spanning a baseline study (outsourced), responsive research pieces (internally led and outsourced), regular surveys (e.g., pre-departure worker surveys), LSU capacity assessments, annual reporting to DFAT and reflection workshops. MEL products reviewed by the evaluation team were of sound quality.

Ordinarily, MEL for international development programs may be conceived as testing the merits of the underlying theory of change. But as highlighted elsewhere in this report, a parallel focus of PLF has been keeping track of a range of service metrics for in-Australia operations. This has created a particularly challenging aspect for the QLP team. In some large part this was driven by domestic politics fuelled by media coverage of worker welfare concerns—exacerbated by the pandemic, fires and floods. A QLP team member recalled:

> *"Managing the data was a big piece which grew from 2020. We were reporting weekly to DFAT on a range of things like numbers of workers, locations, etc. Data management was an enormous part of what we did. There were a lot of data quality issues. We had to change our approach several times. For example, we realised we couldn't rely on worker phone numbers which tended to change, making survey data unreliable…our data was the foundation of almost all briefings that DFAT did for Ministers".*

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[66] Not recruited until July 2019 (https://www.alineainternational.com/monitoring-evaluation-learning/).
[67] These staff are recruited from within the region, drawn from a range of MEL and social science backgrounds.
[68] This level of MEL investment is below international good practice, but consistent with comparable DFAT investments in recent years.

Clear Horizon

For much of the early implementation period, this data management was done with spreadsheets. A senior PLF team member recalled "*We were just working on spreadsheets. It was all very manual and open to errors. We were tracking all sorts of operational metrics like individual worker locations, status of issues…etc*". Ultimately there was agreement for PLF to undertake significant information system development (PALMIS and IRD, see Section 4.2.2). A software development team (2.5 FTE) was recruited in-house, and worked closely with the QLP team, which created further work pressure, including cleaning data to be migrated to the databases. At the time of this evaluation, the Information Technology (IT) team was continuing to roll out the IRD and supporting LSUs to use it. One IT developer reported the following about the IRD:

> "*It's been amazing…previously the [LSU] offices were full of stacks of paper that were unusable. Now it's all online…there's no long history of IT systems in these places, but everyone from Ministers to Directors to staff see the benefits of the system. They can track welfare cases, black-list employers etc. We currently have 120 [IRD] users per day across 6 countries, and the rollout is continuing*".

Beyond the data management and stakeholder responsiveness, there is evidence that the work of the QLP team has had more profound influence. For example, an LSU capacity assessment tool has been implemented three times over the life of investment, and QLP staff pointed to cases where this had informed country planning. Similarly, the integration of GEDSI into capacity assessments has driven a focus on this policy priority. A QLP team member observed:

> "*The capacity assessment tool involves self-assessments. Some of the scores may be a bit inflated, but the real value of the tool lies in the process which promotes frank discussions between PLF and LSU staff that don't ordinarily happen. Everyone complains about the GEDSI section because it's quite onerous, but it's the only time we discuss and reflect, which ends up being really valued*".

The QLP team cited other cases of MEL information being utilised for program improvement, such as responsive research to address shortcomings in the Skills Development Program, analysis of critical incident data to inform Regional Engagement team planning, and Worker Disengagement. All annual reports also capture lessons learned and the outcome of reflection workshops.

Of particular note has been PLF's efforts in relation to research. An ambitious research strategy was developed, and while this may not have been adequately resourced, it nonetheless underpinned important products and directions. PLF's economics analyst undertook numerous responsive analyses that supported the dynamic whole-of-government policy process. Research studies such as the Family Separation Study were high quality and provided evidence to support policies and pilots. A key feature of the research agenda was the way that the QLP team coordinated with third-party researchers engaged in labour mobility, such as the Australia National University and the World Bank. This extended to negotiating and implementing data sharing agreements, which remain supportive of sector-wide research and development efforts.

Clear Horizon

A key issue raised by QLP team members concerns their role definition and demands on their time. Evidently, early work involved promoting the benefits of the QLP team internally in PLF and in the LSUs, arguably as part of building a 'performance culture'. The QLP lead recalled:

> *"The first couple of years it was all about demonstrating our value to other teams and LSUs. We're now inundated with requests for support and evidence and intel. There is a broader recognition of the importance of data".*

A QLP team member concurred:

> *"We've seen changes in expectations and understanding of MEL in partner governments. We get more MEL requests which suggests changes in understanding and demand for evidence. Labour mobility data is now a hot topic in parliament".*

However, QLP staff based in labour sending countries reported that their roles have expanded into a diverse range or responsibilities. One team member stated:

> *"Because QLP staff have capacity, we get pulled into other priorities, and QLP core functions can suffer…the upside is we get to develop a deeper understanding about other aspects of labour mobility, but it can mean that MEL work slows down".*

Another team member advised:

> *"The future design should be clear about the role definition of QLP team members…we are part of the LSU but guests of the LSU. Our bread and butter is MEL, but we perform other roles too. Even within PLF, sometimes QLP priorities get overlooked by the PLF Engagement Managers…there needs to be clear lines of reporting between QLP and LSU staff…perhaps IRD, Communications and QLP could all be in one team reporting to the QLP lead".*

An implication for the next phase of PLF is that the foundation laid through the establishment of information systems and a nascent performance culture should be consolidated.

Recommendation

7. The design team for the next phase of PLF should ensure adequate resourcing of ongoing information system rollout and support, a robust and responsive research agenda, and a high standard of MEL including benchmarking of quality and value-for-money.

5. CONCLUSION

DFAT commissioned the QTAG and an additional independent evaluator to undertake an evaluation of the PLF. In line with standard practice, the evaluation was to provide accountability for PLF's performance as DFAT's implementing partner, and to enable learning for the design of a further phase of support for labour mobility.

The evaluation team was tasked with assessing how effectively and efficiently PLF coordinated service delivery across the range of functions required, including the support and capacity building invested in labour-sending countries through the LSUs. In addition, the evaluation team considered PLF's contribution to DFAT development policy priorities: sustainability, GEDSI and MEL.

The evaluation team was resourced to review key documents and conduct key informant interviews with relevant Australian government officials (DFAT and DEWR in Canberra), PLF staff (in Brisbane and the Pacific), labour sending country government officials from Tonga, Vanuatu and Kiribati, diplomatic representatives from labour sending countries, and various informed actors such as researchers, private sector stakeholders, NGO staff and employer representatives.

The evaluation team found that PLF was largely effective and efficient in relation to the coordination of an array of support services and functions across the entire worker 'journey'—the scope and scale of which grew dramatically over the life of the investment. The coordination of these services was through a functionalist structure led by a small and stable leadership team that ultimately spanned eight sub-teams or 'work-streams'. Each workstream had its own structure with a lead, managers and coordinators responsible for delivering the documented responsibilities of that workstream, and coordinating as required with other PLF workstreams. New work streams were progressively added as the scope of the contract expanded, facilitated by seven contract amendments. Workstreams variously focussed on worker and AE support in Australia, LSU support in the Pacific/Timor-Leste and corporate or cross-cutting functions.

Learning and continuous improvement was driven by the QLP team, but actively enabled by the leadership team which promoted a culture of reflection. Many stakeholders affirmed the responsiveness and adaptability of the PLF team, which not only accommodated significant contextual change and expanding needs of the Australian Government and various stakeholders, but also managed internal growth and the onboarding of up to 190 new staff in a relatively short period of time. In addition, PLF advised the Australian Government on operational and strategic matters, mitigated and managed an array of risks to the PALM scheme, and engaged with a range of academic and research institutions.

The coordination/alignment of 'offshore' with 'onshore' processes was generally well regarded and facilitated in large part by embedded PLF staff within the LSUs. These roles essentially brokered communications between Australian and labour sending stakeholders. These PLF staff also played a critical role in informing their Australia-based PLF colleagues in relation to labour sending country issues and considerations. In a formal sense, there were only three scenarios that required the specific coordination of services in-Australia and in labour sending countries: i) management of critical incidents; ii) responding to employer-related issues raised by workers; iii) Assurance Team interventions in response to employer–worker issues identified in routine monitoring and incident management.

Notwithstanding the overall strong performance and achievements of PLF and the PALM scheme more broadly, several challenges remain for the next phase of programming, arising from each of the three key phases of labour mobility: i) worker readiness; ii) worker welfare; iii) worker reintegration.

Clear Horizon

Worker readiness systems have responded impressively to the dramatic growth in the number of worker mobilisations. Of particular note, PDB processes have matured and professionalised. Areas for further evolution and refinement have been identified through various initiatives piloted across the region—notably a World Vision/IOM pilot in Vanuatu. However, additional pre-departure content must be balanced against the pragmatics of worker absorptive capacity and cost. There will need to be ongoing reflection and refinement driven by evolution in the worker welfare support processes (below) and further changes in scope such as family accompaniment.

In Australia, **worker welfare** has evolved as a key challenge for the PALM scheme, and hence for PLF. These services will be further transitioned to DEWR in the forward period and the role of a service provider such as PLF will likely diminish. Nevertheless, lessons learned remain relevant—especially the importance of culturally relevant and personalised worker support (such as provided by the CLO network) rather than centralised/abstracted support such as the Support Services Line. A key issue for DEWR is that currently, the LSUs are not well oriented to the role and processes of DEWR, which manifests as weak person-to-person contacts—something which is fundamental to successful operations in the region. The Community of Care model was developed to enable greater efficiency and scalability and should be formally reviewed, noting that many stakeholders consider that it is not working adequately. Worker welfare issues will likely continue to evolve in response to labour mobility policy issues—notably the question of worker portability between employers, and other changes such as family accompaniment, the addition of new industries and longer-term visas. Worker welfare has emerged as central to the maintenance of a social license for labour mobility, both in Australia and in labour sending countries. In these circumstances, there will need to be ongoing (and clarified) collaboration between DFAT, DEWR, and labour sending diplomatic missions.

The matter of **worker reintegration** is an area for much more investment and innovation moving forward. PLF's plans to strengthen worker reintegration services were directed at leveraging the financial benefit accrued through working in Australia but were largely shelved by the demands of COVID-19 and growth of the scheme. This domain offers DFAT an important area to support labour sending governments, across a range of strategic areas spanning tax revenue through entrepreneurship, skills development and climate-induced migration. Along with worker welfare, this domain provides potential to further reinforce the social license for labour mobility as well as offering opportunities to augment strategic bilateral relationships beyond just operational support for LSUs.[69] A move by DFAT to install additional Australia-based staff in labour sending DFAT posts is timely. These roles should seek to broker ways to leverage labour mobility priorities and opportunities against other relevant bilateral development investments. This will go some way to confronting growing concerns/perceptions in the region that labour mobility presents a social and economic risk to labour sending governments—especially the matter of 'skills drain'.

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[69] Key domains in which labour sending countries are evolving their own perspectives and priorities include: focusing on short-term or longer-term deployments; lower or more highly skilled workers; numbers of workers sent; matters in relation to government revenue; policies to support investment and micro-enterprise by returning workers; strategic workforce development issues (especially in critical areas such as health and education).

In relation to DFAT's development priority themes:

Sustainability remains an issue that requires further debate and resolution in the context of an expanding PALM scheme. The conception of sustainability evolved significantly over the life of the investment, and then was largely set aside as an agenda during the period of rapid scale-up and amid responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, the concept of sustainability was underpinned by a market-based 'user pays' construct. This framing has evidently given way to a wider concept of sustainability that emphasises equality and inclusion and the broader strategic and geopolitical interests of Australia and the labour sending countries. 'Social license' for the scheme in all participating countries has emerged as an organising principle.

A dedicated **GEDSI** team was engaged and integrated within the QLP team, which ensured that equality and inclusion were key considerations in the performance management arrangements. PLF was able to promote a range of initiatives which contributed to a significant increase in the number of women participating in labour mobility, but the overall percentage remains around 20%, and these women are predominantly engaged in two industries. A cohesive design for promoting disability inclusion was developed by PLF in 2022, but its implementation has been hampered by reluctance among approved employers to promote workers with disability. The work of influencing lasting changes in the norms that drive equality and inclusion are acknowledged to require significant time and investment. This work should continue to expand in the future, with innovation required both in Australia and in labour sending countries.

MEL is not only a development policy priority and contractual requirement of DFAT, but fundamental to implementing an adaptive and responsive program such as PLF. The QLP team within PLF managed a large workload which was dominated by the capture and reporting of an array of ever-changing service metrics to the Australian Government. Much of this was directed at managing [arguably] poorly informed Australian media in relation to worker welfare matters. In addition, the QLP team was required to undertake regular development-focussed MEL work, most notably the tracking of evolving LSU capacity and the integration of GEDSI principles across the workstreams. A third area that dominated the capacity of QLP related the development of information systems. These are seen by many as being critical to supporting efficiency, transparency and scalability of the scheme. The rollout of these information systems is continuing. Experience suggests that such rollouts (especially across national, cultural, educational and technological boundaries) are challenging, and will likely require continued support in the future. A final focus of the QLP team was oversight of responsive research. This work was ambitious, arguably under-resourced, but contributed substantive insights to improve PLF operations specifically, and the PALM scheme more broadly. It also situated the work of PLF within a broader intellectual 'community' of academic researchers in the domain. Noting many of the remaining complexities that criss-cross the PALM scheme, this work should be continued and expanded moving forward.

APPENDIX A TERMS OF REFERENCE

Terms of Reference

Independent Evaluation of the Pacific Labour Facility

Background

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is Australia's key program to address unskilled, low-skilled and semi-skilled labour shortages across rural and regional Australia. Under the scheme Australian businesses can hire workers from nine Pacific-island countries and Timor-Leste when there are not enough local workers available. Once approved to participate in the PALM scheme, employers can recruit workers to fill positions for short-term placements of up to nine months or longer-term placements of between one and four years. PALM scheme workers can be employed in any sector and in all regional and rural postcodes, while all Australian businesses in the agriculture sector can participate in the scheme.

The PALM scheme is a highly relevant program that is currently managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) with the support of the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF). The PLF has been operational from 2018. The PLF administers the long-term stream of the PALM scheme. The PLF also provides sending-country and approved employer (AE) onboarding support for the short-term stream of the PALM scheme. DEWR administers the short-term stream of the PALM scheme which is implemented under a different deed and guidelines. There have been several changes in the PALM scheme over the last 12 months. On 23 November 2021, the official merging of the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) and Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) under the PALM scheme was announced, with implementation of this merged 'single program' scheduled to take place in April 2022. The PALM scheme visa was launched in April 2022; however, the implementation of the single program was delayed until an as-yet undetermined date, in part due to a delay in tax legislation. Further significant changes in the past 12 months include: a change of Australian Government; changes in the policy settings for Australia's labour mobility initiatives; machinery of government changes that split responsibility for delivery between DFAT and DEWR; and ongoing work to consolidate the PLS and SWP into a single PALM scheme. In addition, 80 per cent more longer-term PALM scheme workers arrived in Australia in 2021-22 than originally projected.

The PALM scheme aims to ensure that sustainable and effective expansion of circular labour mobility to Australia contributes to inclusive economic growth and social development of Pacific island countries (PICs) and Timor-Leste. This goal recognises that the benefits of labour mobility, including increased incomes and new skills and qualifications, can lead to a range of positive economic and social impacts, such as improved health and education outcomes, and enhanced work opportunities. The PLF contributes to this goal through three End of Program Outcomes (EOPO).

- EOPO 1: An increase of appropriately skilled and diverse women and men are mobilised to work in Australia.
- EOPO 2: There is a sustainable and growing demand for Pacific women and men workers from Australian industry.
- EOPO 3: The PLS maximises benefit and minimises risk to Pacific women and men workers and Pacific and Australian communities.

Clear Horizon

In addition to advancing these policy objectives, the PLF has focused on the following.

- Establishing two new PLF streams to support scheme growth: the Australian engagement stream which provides the PLF with a regional presence to promote the scheme and support AEs through their PALM scheme experience; as well as the assurance stream which, through its audits and investigations, is continuously providing the PLF with evidence to inform risk management and scheme growth.
- Implementing a community of care approach for worker wellbeing, specifically capacity support to AEs to respond to worker-related issues and critical incidents.
- Supporting labour sending units (LSUs) and AEs to support inclusion and diversity strategies through highlighting women's transferable skills and suitability of women for non-traditional roles; a planned disability pilot program; encouraging youth, people with disabilities and rural and remote communities to participate in line with LSU priorities; as well as communications to address family awareness.
- Rolling out technology platforms such as the in-country recruitment database (IRD) and external stakeholder portals in the PLF management information system (MIS) to streamline processes and increase automation, leading to greater efficiencies within the scheme.
- Undertaking continued research and forming new partnerships to diversify industries in the PLS, including an aged care expansion pilot.
- Enhancing support for PALM scheme workers to access to skills training and development.

While the current PLF contract is due to end in December 2023, it is likely the contract will be extended for a short period while the next phase of offshore service provision is designed (with DFAT leading the design process in close collaboration with DEWR).

Note DEWR leads on *onshore* operational services and employer engagement while DFAT leads on overall policy and all strategic elements of the PALM scheme as well as *offshore* operational services, including LSU engagement. It is anticipated DFAT will lead on Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) Policy although DEWR will also have responsibilities in these areas (how MERL responsibilities will be shared between departments is currently under consideration).

Lessons learned and recommendations from current management arrangements will support the streamlined and coherent future management of the PALM scheme by the two departments. These lessons might relate to how PLF:

1. promoted coordination across its various departments/teams;

2. coordinated with SWP when it was still managed by DEWR; and

3. coordinated with other key stakeholders – e.g. with DFAT Canberra and Posts, DEWR, and Pacific and Timor-Leste agencies and government officials.

The Quality and Technical Assurance Group (QTAG) independently reviews program implementation of the PALM scheme and the PLF on an annual basis and provides technical advice and recommendations to DFAT with a focus on the performance of the PLF. The QTAG also provides strategic support, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), learning advice and quality assurance of products to DFAT on an *ad hoc* basis. DFAT has commissioned the QTAG to conduct this independent evaluation through exercising the third and final option to extend the current Service Order (SO) 75522/2 until 8 December 2023.

Purpose

The independent evaluation has two primary purposes.

1. Accountability – the independent, evidence-based evaluation of the PLF will primarily demonstrate accountability for public funds and inform DFAT reporting requirements (in combination with the Completion Report to be prepared by PLF in late 2023); and

2. Learning and improvement – secondly, the evaluation provides an important opportunity to capture lessons to inform the next phase of DFAT's support for the PALM scheme.

In line with these purposes, the primary users of the evaluation are DFAT and the future implementing partner of the next phase of DFAT-funded PALM scheme support.

Secondary audiences include DEWR and PIC and Timor-Leste governments.

The evaluation will be conducted in line with DFAT's Ethical Research and Evaluation Guidance.

Scope

The evaluation will assess the effectiveness of DFAT's PLF investment from 2018 to 2023, including (but not restricted to) the performance of PLF as DFAT's implementing partner. The evaluation will explore and provide data on achievements, challenges, and enabling/hindering factors; and will take account of PLF's highly dynamic operating context.

It will provide an opportunity to capture lessons as well as review and evaluate PLF's approach to ensuring coordination of onshore and offshore efforts to deliver an effective PALM program; feed into the new design phase of PALM 2.0; and position DFAT with the appropriate evidence and data for the Final Investment Monitoring Report (FIMR) which is required to be undertaken at the end of the PLF contract. Thus, the evaluation has four broad focus areas:

- An assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of collaboration and coordination between onshore and offshore services. Currently, PLF takes a whole of system approach, i.e., its services cover all aspects of the worker journey. This aspect of the evaluation will look at: 1) how PLF promoted coordination across its various departments/teams; 2) how PLF coordinated with SWP when it was still managed by DEWR; 3) other key coordination relationships – e.g., DFAT, LSUs, CLOs, HOMs, etc. Lessons will inform development of models for coordination between DFAT, DEWR, and their implementing partners in the next phase.
- Offshore PLM services, e.g. support and capacity building for partner countries, as well as pre-departure and reintegration support to workers and their families. These findings will inform the design of the next phase of offshore service provision, to be commissioned by DFAT.
- Assessing GEDSI and sustainability dimensions of both points above, in line with DFAT's FIMR requirements.
- Assessing the quality of PLF's monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) system.

Key Questions

1. **How effectively and efficiently have PLM services been coordinated internally and externally across all stages of the employer and worker journey?**

    a. What have been the main achievements and challenges in relation to coordination of PLM services across all stages of the worker and employer journey, including in relation to promotion of GEDSI?
    b. What factors (positive or negative) have shaped the effectiveness and efficiency of service coordination?
    c. How might key lessons be applied in the next phase, considering proposed changes in roles and responsibilities of DFAT, DEWR, and their implementing partners?

2. How effective was provision of offshore PLM services, e.g. support and capacity building for partner countries, as well as pre-departure and reintegration support to workers and their families?

    a. What were the main strengths and weaknesses of offshore service provision in terms of meeting the needs of LSUs, workers, employers, and other partners? To what extent were end-of-program and intermediate outcomes achieved? Were gender and GEDSI considerations adequately addressed?
    b. What factors explain particularly positive or challenging aspects of offshore service provision?
    c. How might key lessons be applied to the design and implementation of the next phase of offshore service provision?
    d. What have been the main achievements, challenges, and contributing factors relating to sustainability of these offshore services? How could DFAT promote the sustainability of these services under the next phase?

3. **To what extent did the PLF MEL system generate credible information that was used for management decision-making, learning and accountability purposes?**

    a. What were the main strengths and weaknesses of PLF's MEL system?
    b. What key contributing factors supported or hindered the credibility and use of PLF's MEL data?
    c. How might MEL-related lessons be applied in the next phase, to ensure a fit for purpose MEL approach?

Evaluation Methodology

Data collection is likely to involve the following.

*   Document review.
*   Participation in PLF's own reflection workshops planned for early May 2023 (currently scheduled for w/c 8 May) with PLF staff (including PIC- and Timor-Leste-based staff).
*   Consultation workshop with a cross-section of PIC and Timor-Leste government representatives, either in Australia or a sending country.
*   Individual and group interviews with key stakeholders – DFAT, DEWR, PLF, workers, etc.

Preliminary findings will be presented to DFAT, PLF, and DEWR for feedback and discussion before the report is drafted. Methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation will be elaborated in the evaluation plan, which will be developed consultatively with primary users.

Roles/Team

The evaluation team will consist of:

- Team Leader – Paul Crawford (est. 40 days)
    - Senior evaluator
    - Highly experienced conducting evaluations of complex programs
    - Deep understanding of organisational development and systems thinking
    - Significant experience evaluating programs in the Pacific region.
- Labour Mobility Specialists – Heather Nunns (est. 30 days) and Charlotte Bedford (est. 10 days)
    - Evaluators and researchers
    - Deep understanding and experience with PLM opportunities and challenges in Australia and New Zealand settings, including GEDSI impacts
    - Significant experience evaluating programs in the Pacific region
    - Highly experienced conducting evaluations of complex programs.

From Clear Horizon, Dave Green will provide quality assurance and DFAT liaison support. Rennai Marlais will provide administrative and logistics support.

The team will report to Kate Fuller, DFAT QTAG contract manager and, where relevant, Priya Sivakumaran, Director of the DFAT Pacific Labour Growth Strategy and Design Section. Sue-Ellen O'Farrell/Kristy Ward will be the team's key points of contact in PLF. DFAT, PLF, and DEWR will have an opportunity for feedback at key points in the review, including feedback on the evaluation plan, attendance at a preliminary findings presentation, and feedback on the final report. PLF will assist with arranging meetings and coordinating face-to-face discussions as appropriate.

Deliverables & Timeframe

A rough timeline is outlined below and will provide an opportunity for parallel design support and sharing of lessons and early findings where relevant. Key outputs will include the following.

- Evaluation plan (responding to this Terms of Reference (ToRs)) – meeting DFAT Design and M&E standard 9
- Presentation of preliminary findings and written Aide Memoire
- Draft report – meeting DFAT Design and M&E standard 10
- Final report – meeting DFAT Design and M&E standard 10, likely to be published (within three months of finalisation). Particularly sensitive material may be included in internal annexes.
- Evaluation brief summarising key findings and recommendations, for sharing with relevant parts of DFAT and other stakeholders

A more detailed timeline will be agreed in the evaluation plan, meeting requirements of DFAT Design and M&E Standard 8.14 and 9.16 relating to scheduling.

Task	When
Draft TORs, consult within DFAT	March 2023
Final draft TORs approved and disseminated	May 2023
Evaluation Team confirmed and recruitment of external Team Leader	May 2023
Approve evaluation plan	By end May 2023
Evaluation data collection	June – August 2023
Share information and coordinate with design team as and where required and appropriate	July/August 2023
Early findings presented - depending on design timeline; comms products designed	August 2023
Aide Memoire or Executive Summary	Early September 2023
Draft review submitted to DFAT	September 2023
Comments and feedback incorporated, and final report submitted for management response and clearance	October 2023

APPENDIX B EMployer – Worker Journey

Stage	Approved employer (AE) journey	AE - worker intersection: What does 'good' <u>coordination of services</u> look like?	Worker journey (and family at home)
Stage 1: Pre-application, application, recruitment	• Application submitted to become an Approved Employer. • Completes onboarding processes. • Worker recruitment application submitted. • Workers recruited. • An offer of employment given to each worker. • Visa applications submitted to Home Affairs 14 calendar dates before proposed travel date.	• **Interested people and their families have access to information about what's involved in being a PALM worker.** • **AEs actively engage with LSUs e.g. to understand preferred recruitment approaches, timing etc.** • **Potential recruits are available that meet AE's skill and experience requirements.** • **AEs work around the amount of time LSUs need for recruitment and worker processing.** • **AE recruitment practices are receptive to GEDSI priorities.**	• Worker and their families make an informed decision about participating in PALM. • Worker and their family have shared goals about PALM participation e.g. financial goals. • Worker applies to become a PALM worker via LSU processes e.g. work ready pool. • Worker is recruited by an AE, receives, and accepts offer of employment.
Stage 2: Pre-mobilisation, mobilisation	• AE prepares for workers' arrival. Preparation includes the workplace and staff e.g. building cultural competencies of supervisors, team leaders and managers.	• **Pre-departure briefings delivered by LSUs provide workers with useful information to prepare them for working and living in Australia.** • **AEs provide recruited workers with useful information about the job they will be doing and location where they will be living.**	• Worker and their family have time to make necessary preparations for the worker's absence e.g. support for spouse, food production responsibilities. • Spouses have realistic expectations of likely remittance amounts after tax, deductions and living costs
Stage 3: Worker arrival in Australia; AE capacity building	• AE delivers face to face on-arrival briefing to workers. • AE provides workplace induction to workers. • AE completes and submits arrival report. • Welfare Support person has (at least) fortnightly face to face meetings with workers to establish rapport and check-in	• **On arrival in Australia, workers are met by the AE or are given sufficient support/information to get to their accommodation.** • **AE works through on-arrival requirements with workers within five days of arrival (bank account etc).** • **On arrival briefing (and other briefings in the following weeks) provide workers with the information they need to**	• Workers have the knowledge they need to settle into work routines. • Workers settle into and become part of their new community e.g. join church, clubs. • Workers know and are confident about accessing support if they need it e.g. PALM Support Line, CLOs.

Stage	Approved employer (AE) journey	AE - worker intersection: What does 'good' coordination of services look like?	Worker journey (and family at home)
	about everyday issues. • AEs deal with worker grievances in a timely manner to avoid escalation (may involve LSUs and CLOs as appropriate). • Workers are offered skill development opportunities as appropriate. • AE is supported by PLF capacity building activities on an as-required basis, via the AES.	**settle into work and life in Australia e.g. maintaining health and wellbeing, safety in the community.** • **Good communication channels established between workers and the Welfare Support Person mean the worker feels confident about sharing issues/concerns with him/her.** • **AE addresses worker's work concerns/support needs/welfare issues in a timely manner to prevent them from escalating.**	• Workers are aware of and access education and information resources provided by PLF. • Workers maintain regular contact with family at home to mitigate homesickness and sustain family dynamics. • Spouses and children left at home receive the support they need in the worker's absence (via family, church, NGOs etc)
Stage 4: Return preparation, reintegration	• AE helps workers to start preparing to return home e.g. savings for flight home, flight booking, leaving accommodation. • AE delivers face to face departure briefing for workers immediately before departure e.g. final pay etc.	• *Note: once the worker leaves the employer, that's the end of the AE-worker intersection.*	• Workers make a successful transition into family and community at home. • Reintegration support offered by LSUs? NGOs? • Workers and spouses use savings for their intended purposes e.g. house construction, enterprise development.

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APPENDIX B INTERVIEWEES

DFAT	• **Office of the Pacific (5)** • **Former Labour Mobility Director** • **Former Assistance Director** • **Former Labour Mobility Officer** • **Chief Economist** • **Education and skills team**
DEWR	• Worker Support Director and five members of various teams that have worked with PLF • Former Senior Manager • Former Director
Pacific/Timor-Leste Governments	• HOM PNG • HOM Fiji • HOM Samoa • HOM Solomon Islands • HOM Tonga • HOM Nauru • HOM Vanuatu • Country Liaison Officer Tonga • Country Liaison Officer Solomon Islands
PLF (Brisbane consultations)	• PLF Team Leader and Deputy Team Leader • GEDSI Manager and Coordinator • QPL Lead and M&E Manager • Acting Worker and Employer Support Services Lead, Employer Onboarding Manager, Worker Support Manager • Chief Information Officer and two team members • Assurance Lead • Pacific & Timor Leste Engagement Lead and two Regional Engagement Managers • Australian Engagement Lead and team member • Strategy & Partnerships Manager • In-country Engagement Managers and Program Managers (5) • In-country QLP Managers (4) • Training Support Manager
Tonga consultations	• Australian High Commission (3) • Deputy CEO Labour Division, Ministry of Trade & Economic Development • Acting CEO Ministry of Internal Affairs and Head of Women's Division • Welfare Officer & Welfare Coordinator • LSU Senior Employment Officer • LSU Data Officer • PLF Program Manager
Vanuatu consultations	• Labour Commissioner • IOM • World Vision • PLF (2) • V-Lab • LSU team members (5) • Seasonal worker • Labour mobility agents

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Kiribati consultations	• Director and four senior managers Kiribati Institute of Technology • Secretary Ministry of Employment and Human Resources and • Director for Labour • Panel Doctor Marine Training Centre • PLF In-country Engagement Manager
Other	• ANU (2) • Executive Officer, Approved Employers of Australia • Labour mobility consultant

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