

Policy brief

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LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF FIJI AS A RECEIVING COUNTRY IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE-RELATED MIGRATION

- ▶ Intra-Pacific Island migration has been largely overlooked in climate change-related migration studies, particularly the role of Pacific Islands as receiving countries of climate change-related migrants.
- ▶ This pioneering study investigates to what extent local Fijians are willing to accept climate change-related migrants in Fiji, in comparison to other categories of migrants, and what attributes of migrants affects their acceptance.
- ▶ While Fijians are supportive to accommodate climate change-related Pacific Islander immigrants, anticipating (perceived) resource conflicts are crucial to consider in policies addressing climate change-related migration.

What is the issue?

The recently released sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states, with high confidence, that climate hazards associated with extreme events and variability act as direct drivers of displacement and as indirect drivers of migration through deteriorating climate-sensitive livelihoods.

In the Pacific Island region, people are already on the move due to climate change impacts and their consequences. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2021), around 50,000 Pacific Islanders are at risk of being displaced each year due to disasters. Climate change-related migration

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **Immigrants who move due to climate change are more accepted than those who move to Fiji due to persecution or are refugees.**
- ▶ **Educated and skilled Pacific Islanders who are relocating due to climate change are the most accepted immigrant type.**
- ▶ **Less educated and low-skilled immigrants relocating to Fiji to reunite with family are least accepted.**

is slowly yet steadily gaining recognition in national and regional policies in the Pacific. For instance, the current Fijian government has announced the willingness to receive potential climate-related displaced and relocated people. However, policies are yet to be determined.

Despite the growing interest, this study has identified two key knowledge gaps that remain in understanding the relationship between migration, climate change and development in the context of cross-border migration.

First, empirically grounded research has hitherto largely focused on the motivations and views of people from migrant origin countries. The perceptions of receiving communities of climate change-related migrants within the Pacific Island region have been largely overlooked in research so far.

Secondly, ‘intra-Pacific Island migration’ has been neglected, while studies – mostly funded and researched by non-Pacific Islanders and following their interests – have almost exclusively regarded Pacific Island countries as ‘sending countries’ in the context of climate change migration and have examined migration from Pacific Island countries to advanced economies in the Pacific Rim and beyond.

In response to these research gaps, this study is the first to investigate perceptions of receiving communities in Fiji in the context of climate change-related intra-Pacific Island migration. This policy brief presents results of one component of this large-scale study. The final results of this component, as well as research results from other components, are

under analysis and will be published in due course.

Research Findings

Using the online platform KoBoToolbox, an in-depth online survey was deployed in Fiji in September 2021. The survey was distributed by applying purposive random sampling to people above the age of 18 with Fijian nationality through the use of social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Research participants were sampled according to their gender, level of education and those who were employed at the time of participation.

Reasons to accept climate-change migrants

In the first survey part, respondents ($n = 51$) were presented with five types of immigrant groups and were asked to rank the level of acceptance, ranging from 1 (most accepted) to 5 (least accepted). To collect qualitative data, respondents were given the option to explain their answers. Figure 1 shows the average ranking score for each immigrant group.

The results show that more respondents agree to accept migrants who are entrepreneurs and investors compared with immigrants who have low human and financial capital and have nowhere else to go. Respondents explained this preference by stating economic reasons, such as “Fiji should allow more skilled and well qualified migrants to come and contribute to its growth”, or that “a benefit is that it brings in employment opportunities to the locals and contributes to investment in Fiji’s economy”.

As for migrants who move to Fiji due to slow-onset climate change impacts such as sea level rise and drought, results show that the degree of acceptance is greater when compared with that of migrants seeking refuge due to persecution or war and those who migrate for family reunification.

These findings indicate that climate change-related migrants are perceived to be those who are the most vulnerable and need help the most. However, respondents also articulated that Fiji itself is at the frontline of climate change impacts. Hence, while these local

Fijians sympathise with climate change-related migrants, they are also wary of their own future livelihood security which ultimately affects their willingness of acceptance.

Overall, the results indicate that climate change is a more important reason to accept immigrants compared with other factors pushing immigrants away from their home countries. Ultimately, however, the perceived contributions that immigrants make to Fiji are more important than the perceived push-factors for Fijians' acceptance of immigrants.

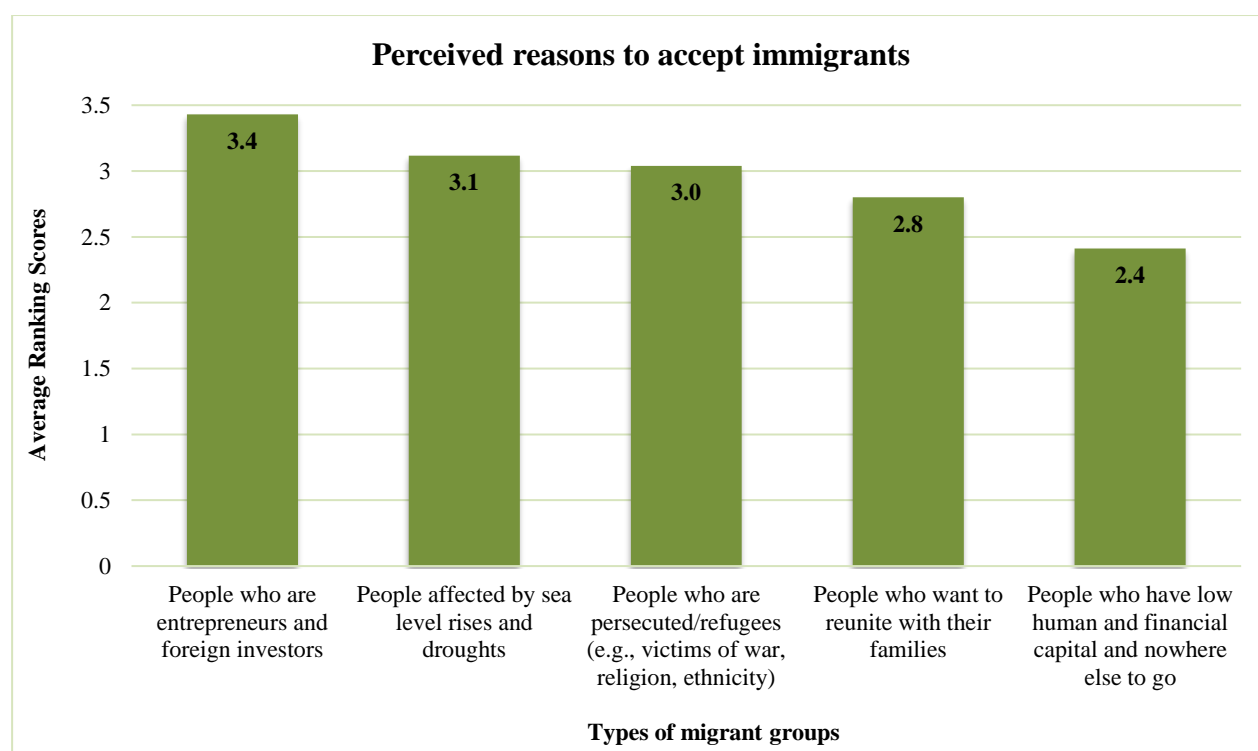


Figure 1: Average ranking scores of respondents' preference to accept migrants based on perceived reasons to immigrate to Fiji. (Source: Author's research data)

Effects of migrant attributes on migrant acceptance in Fiji

In the second part of the survey, respondents were asked to rate their acceptance of

migrants based on different migrant attributes on a Likert Scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The set of questions aimed to investigate how education

level, age, origin, and numbers of migrants affect Fijians' acceptance of immigrants.

Figure 2 shows a clear pattern of respondents' acceptance of migrants with specific characteristics. These results show a positive correlation between respondents' willingness to accept small numbers of migrants, who are young, well-educated and skilled, and those with Pacific Island origin.

While some respondents felt that allowing Asian migrants in Fiji "maybe good if they come with investments and plans to advance the country's development", respondents were more favourable toward accepting Pacific Islanders than Asians. Additionally, Europeans were more accepted than Asians. Well-educated and skilled people were highly accepted compared with less-educated and low-skilled migrants. Similarly, the

majority of respondents were more likely to accept only a small number of migrants rather than a whole community relocating. Younger migrants, particularly those in the working age group, were accepted more than older people over 60 years of age.

While the above responses reflect higher levels of acceptance towards smaller numbers of young to middle-aged migrants, findings show that a large number of respondents (around 41–47 per cent) reported that they were neutral or undecided.

The research results show a high acceptance level of small quantities of regional migrants who are educated and employable. This indicates a preference for immigrants who pose little substantial economic, social and cultural threat to Fiji.

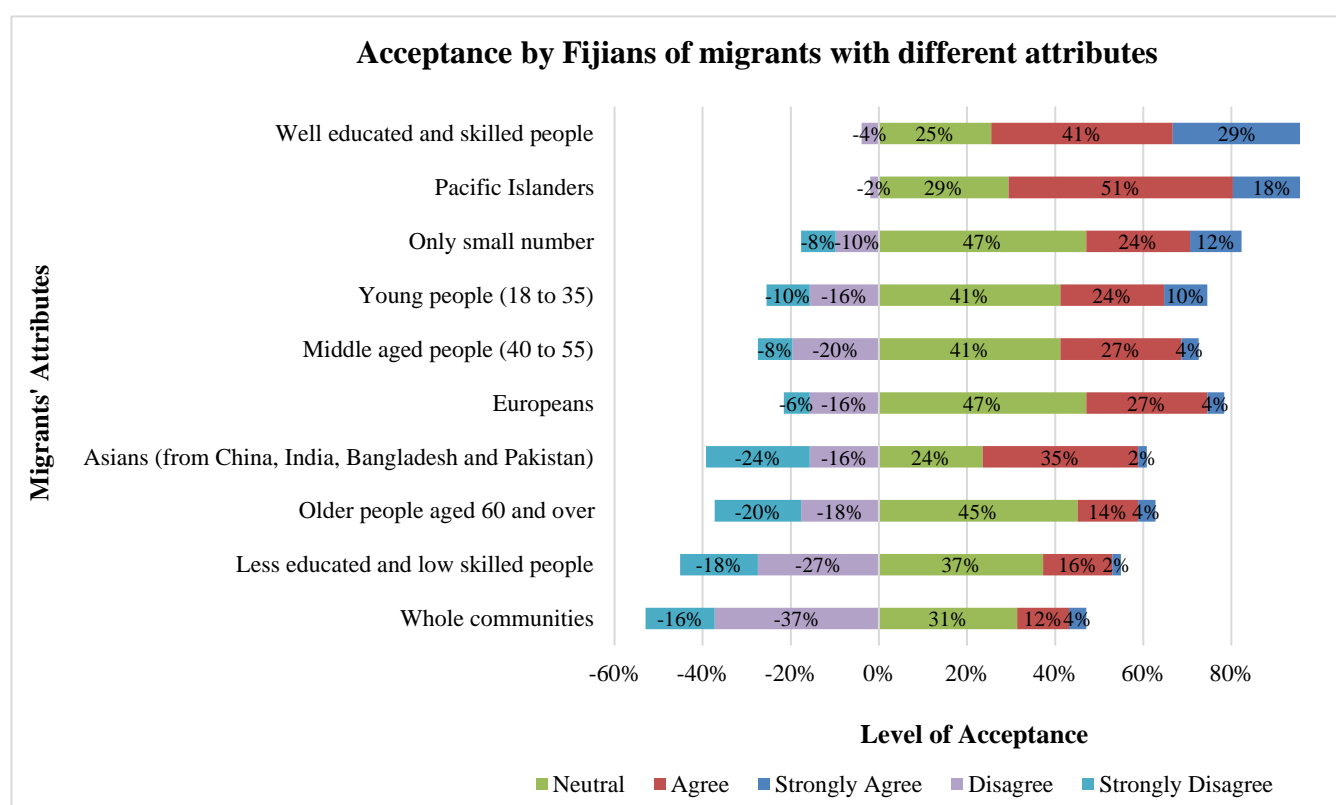


Figure 2: Effects of migrants' attributes on migrant acceptance in Fiji. (Source: Author's research data)

Respondents' explanations highlight ancestral, social and cultural connections with other Pacific Islands as reasons for their willingness to accept Pacific Island migrants. One of the respondents claimed that "we are of the same blood and are practically related, so accepting them into our nation is like accepting one of our own kind".

Another stated that "we [Pacific Islanders] understand each other's cultures better, we are well-versed with the Pacific culture, we respect and have lineage with our ancestors, and share similar cultural values and beliefs."

In sum, findings revealed that in the context of climate change-related migration, individual migrants affected by slow-onset climate impacts, such as sea level rise, are more likely to be accepted than a group of people displaced by disasters. Research participants reported that a large group of disaster displaced people, who would be less educated and forced to move to Fiji, are more likely to cause problems when compared with educated people who would voluntarily decide to move to Fiji over time due to climate change-related reasons. Respondents state that these groups of people may not be able to support themselves and could become a burden on Fiji's economy.

What should policymakers do?

1. Receiving countries must prepare legal instruments, such as immigration policy reforms and strategic plans on migration pathways, which duly consider climate change and disasters.
2. Proper planning for incremental migration in the context of climate change is crucial as this would allow for small groups and avoid larger numbers of migrants coming at once.
3. To avoid problems in receiving countries, it is important to invest in education in origin countries and invest in adaptation.
4. Fiji's immigration and border management system should be strengthened to enable robust and clear checks with strict criteria for immigration regulations, including background and character inspection before allowing people to permanently enter Fiji.
5. Proper integration plans should be established for a win-win outcome for both the receiving communities and the migrants.
6. Stakeholder consultations are essential to include the voices of the receiving communities in the policymaking process on climate change-related migration.
7. Awareness and education programs should be in place for receiving communities in order to better prepare them to cope with the forthcoming changes.

Limitations and further research

The study provides first insights into the unheard voices of local Fijians and their perceptions of climate change-related migrants coming to Fiji from other parts of the Pacific.

The majority of respondents included in this study have a tertiary-level education background and live in urban and peri-urban areas in Fiji. The findings therefore provide an indication of Fiji's more educated and urban population and their acceptance of climate change-related immigrants. They are not representative of Fiji's overall population.

Further research is needed to explore the perceptions of people from other population segments in Fiji, as the acceptance of migrants may vary according to respondents' localities, socio-economic backgrounds and lived experiences.

In addition, a broader scope of research is needed to include policymakers at various levels from local community leaders to national government representatives. Furthermore, research is needed to show to what extent the findings of this study can be applied elsewhere and on a more regional scale.

Some of these next steps are considered in other components of this research and will be published in due course.

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