

**AUSTRALIA’S RESPONSE TOWARDS KIRIBATI’S
MIGRATION WITH DIGNITY POLICY**

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the Australian Government's Response towards Kiribati's Migration with Dignity Policy. Rising sea level caused by climate change forces the Pacific Island states, including Kiribati to relocate their citizens overseas. Kiribati launched the Migration with Dignity policy to provide access for its citizens to work in other countries, especially Australia. The authors argue that Australia responded Kiribati's migration with dignity by providing foreign aid for Kiribati. This study uses a qualitative-descriptive method and utilize the concepts of migration policy and foreign aid, with documentation data collection technique. The results of this study indicate that Australia responded Kiribati's Migration with Dignity policy by providing foreign aid through the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT) and the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI). KIT and KANI opens an opportunity for Kiribati citizens to participate in foreign language and professional skills training, to be able to fulfill Australia's migration policy requirements for foreign workers.

Keywords: Migration with Dignity, Migration Policy, Australia, Kiribati, Foreign Aid

INTRODUCTION

This study tends to examine Australia's response towards Kiribati's migration with dignity policy. Climate change has increased the earth's temperature, which resulted in rising sea level that threatens Pacific Island countries, including Kiribati¹. Rising sea level in Kiribati reached 1-4 mm annually since 1993, with an average of 2.8-3.6 mm per year. Kiribati's islands are approximately 3 meters high above the sea level, with Banaba Island having the tallest height of 81 meters above the sea level². In 2000, Abanuea and Tebua Tarawa islands have submerged underwater due to the rising sea level. This resulted in the loss of fertile lands to grow crops, contamination of fresh water, and the spread of diseases.

To anticipate the impacts of climate change, Kiribati's President Anote Tong proposed the migration with dignity policy during the 67th Meeting of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on September 2012 in New York³. Migration with dignity policy prepares Kiribati citizens to improve their skills through professional training in order to be able to work overseas. Currently, Kiribati has inadequate education system and limited infrastructure development, with 32,7% of the country's income dependent on foreign aid in 2016⁴.

Australia has been a consistent aid provider for Pacific Island states, including Kiribati⁵. Australia assisted Kiribati by providing educational facilities, including building schools and improving English language lessons as a part of the AusAID (Australian Agency for International Development)'s program. Australia also established the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI) which provides scholarship to Kiribati citizens to learn about nursing in Australia. Besides that, Australia has also provided funding for the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT), an educational and vocational training center under Kiribati's Ministry of Labor and Human Resources.

¹ Astriviany, M. "Kiribati's Strategy in Facing the Problem of Sea Level Rise through the Kiribati Adaptation Program (KAP)," *Nation State: Journal of International Studies*. 3(1), (2020). 48–59.

² O'Brien, L. K. *Migration with Dignity: A Study of The Kiribati-Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI)*. PhD dissertation. University Of Kansas. (2013). 10.

³ UN General Assembly. *The General Debate of the 67th Session of The United Nations General Assembly, Statement by Republic of Kiribati - Anote Tong*. (2012). https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/67/KI_en.pdf

⁴ County Reports. *Kiribati Economy*. (2022). <https://www.countryreports.org/country/Kiribati/economy.htm>

⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *Kiribati Country Brief*. (2022). <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/kiribati/kiribati-country-brief>

On the other hand, Australia's migration policy prioritized skilled immigrants in entering Australia. International citizen applying for work in Australia need to be graduates from reputable schools or universities, with at least an IELTS Band 6 score of English proficiency⁶. Australia provides Pacific Island states' citizens the opportunity to work in Australia, especially professionals in elderly care, fishery and maritime, hospitality and tourism, technology and business. Kiribati's training centers provide graduates with internationally recognized certificates to work in Australia⁷.

The Government of Kiribati expects migration with dignity policy to provide access for its citizens to work in Australia, with the possibility of permanent migration⁸. Despite Kiribati's policy, Australia does not guarantee citizenship for international migrant workers. Australia remains selective in accepting migrants to anticipate external threats such as mass migration⁹. Nevertheless, Australia responded Kiribati's migration with dignity policy by providing foreign aid to maintain friendly relations between the two countries.

METHOD

This research uses descriptive qualitative research method with documentation data collecting technique. According to the United Nations, the definition of migration policy includes¹⁰: permanent migration (to stay), temporary migration (to work based on contract, without family members), and migration to reunite with family members, high skilled migration (high qualifications to contribute to the country's economy, allowed to bring family members). On the other hand, the definition of foreign aid is a country's contribution towards other countries in the form of money, service, military or food. Foreign aid support is based on neutrality and independency principle, not based on national, religious, gender,

⁶ IELTS. *IELTS for Migration*. (2022). <https://www.ielts.org/about-ielts/ielts-for-migration>

⁷ Pacific Australia Labor Mobility. *Employers Kiribati*. (2022). <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/countries/kiribati>

⁸ Voigt-Graf, C. & Kagan, S. "Migration and labour mobility from Kiribati". *Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper*. 56, (2017). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2937416

⁹ The Conversation. *The Seas ARE Coming for Us in Kiribati. Will Australia Rehome Us?*. (2021). <https://theconversation.com/the-seas-are-coming-for-us-in-kiribati-will-australia-rehome-us-1721377>

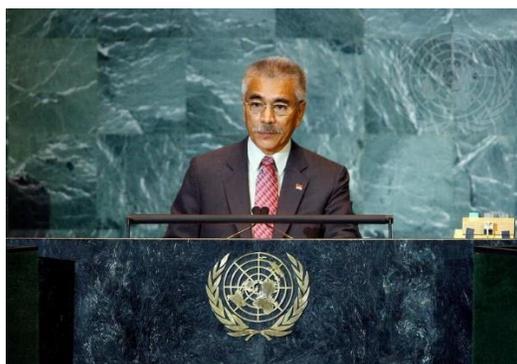
¹⁰ United Nations. *International Migration Policies Government Views and Priorities*. New York: United Nation Publication. (2013).

ethnic or political reasons¹¹. Meanwhile, humanitarian aid means non-political aid provided for countries inflicted by natural disasters, hunger, or plague, to save people's lives and relief suffering¹². The principles of humanitarian aid include: humanity (based on needs,), impartiality (without discrimination), neutrality (to both parties), independency (free from political interest).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Kiribati's Migration with Dignity Policy

President Anote Tong coined the term "Migration with Dignity" for the first time during the 63rd UN General Assembly's General Debate in New York on 25 September 2008¹³. Migration with Dignity is Kiribati's strategic climate change adaptation policy, by relocating its citizens to other countries, especially Australia. Kiribati citizens are expected to improve their educational merit by undergoing vocational training before migrating overseas. Being skilled workers will increase the opportunity for Kiribati citizens to migrate permanently¹⁴. During the UN meeting, President Tong also appreciated Australia and New Zealand's decision to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and provide humanitarian aid towards the Pacific Island states.



Picture 1. President Anote Tong during the 63rd UN General Assembly's General Debate
 Source: UN Photo Digital Asset Management System
<https://www.un.org/en/ga/63/generaldebate/kiribati.shtml>

¹¹Bencanapedia.id. *Bantuan Kemanusiaan Rehabilitasi Dan Rekonstruksi*. (2022). http://bencanapedia.id/Bantuan_Kemanusiaan_Rehabilitasi_dan_Rekonstruksi.

¹²Morgentau, H. "The Political Theory of Foreign Aid," *American Political Science Review*, 56(2), (1962): 302-304.

¹³Zellentin, A. "Climate Change Migration. Cultural Aspects of Climate Change". *Lucius & Lucius: Stuttgart, Analyse & Kritik*. 1, 2010: 70.

¹⁴Voigt-Graf, C. & Kagan, S. "Migration and labour mobility from Kiribati". *Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper*. 56, (2017). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2937416

Afterwards, President Tong officially launched the Migration with Dignity policy during the 67th UN General Assembly in September 2012¹⁵. He explained that this policy became an alternative solution to relocate Kiribati citizens when most islands are no longer livable due to the rising sea levels. In 2016, President Tong also mentioned Migration with Dignity policy during the Official Medium account of the United Nations Environment Program Press Release. He stated that Migration with Dignity should be a part of climate change adaptation strategy¹⁶.

Migration with Dignity policy is a part of Kiribati's National Labor Migration Policy (NLMP)¹⁷. NLMP has a short-term goal to improve Kiribati's economic development, decrease poverty rates and secure workplaces overseas. Furthermore, NLMP's long-term target is to prepare and facilitate seasonal and permanent migration for Kiribati citizens to work overseas, especially to Australia and New Zealand. This policy tends to protect migrant workers' rights overseas, promote job vacancies and improve economic development.

Currently, Kiribati relies on foreign aid to improve the quality of its human resources. Australia became a regular donor, by providing educational facilities with vocational training and foreign language courses for Kiribati citizens. For instance, Australia launched the Technical Vocational Education and Training Sector Strengthening Program (TVETSSP) organized by the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT) to contribute towards Kiribati's economic and social development¹⁸.

Australia's Migration Policy in Response towards Kiribati's Migration with Dignity

Australia's migration policy requires foreign migrants to fulfill specific criteria before admitted to work in Australia. International workers need to be fluent in English, with previous working experience relevant to the chosen job vacancy¹⁹. Australia has two kinds of recruitment program for skilled workers, which are temporary and permanent

¹⁵ Faisal, M. D. "Kebijakan Migration with Dignity sebagai Solusi Prioritas Kiribati dalam Merespon Ancaman Sea Level Rise". *Jurnal Analisis Hubungan Internasional*. 5(1), (2016):268.

¹⁶ Tong, A. *Migration is the 'Brutal Reality' of Climate Change*. (2016). <http://climatechangenews.com>

¹⁷ Moreti, H. M. *Kiribati National Labour Migration Policy*. (2015):17.

¹⁸ Voigt-Graf, C. & Kagan, S. "Migration and labour mobility from Kiribati". *Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper*. 56, (2017). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2937416

¹⁹ Cully, M. "Skilled Migration Selection Policies: Recent Australian Reforms," *Migration Policy Practice*. 1, (2011).

migration²⁰. Temporary migration is opened based on the demand of domestic work field which require international workers on certain positions. On the other hand, to participate in permanent migration, international workers need to obtain minimum 65 points required by the Australian Government's criteria, including: age, English language skills, work experience, academic qualifications, and sponsorship²¹.

Migrant workers in Australia will receive permanent residence status based on their visa²². However, they need to fulfil additional requirements if applying for Australian citizenship. In 2015, Australia also prepares a Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) which allow nine Pacific Island Countries (PIC), including Kiribati to work in Australia's agricultural industry for six months²³. Since 2018, Australia set a maximum working duration of nine months for migrant workers entering Australia through SWP, which now include aquacultural and accommodation sectors. Only 79 Kiribati citizens were qualified to participate in Australia's SWP in 2012-2016.

The Australian government further launched a Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) program in July 2018, which opened job vacancy for cotton and sugarcane farming, slaughterhouses and elderly care²⁴. In 2019, there were 104 Kiribati citizens whom worked in Australia through PLS. Since 4 April 2022, SWP and PLS was combined to form the Pacific Australia Labor Mobility (PALM) scheme organized by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade²⁵. PALM provides opportunity for low skilled workers to work in Australia's rural areas.

Despite Australia's migration programs for international workers, not as many Kiribati citizens fulfilled the requirements to work in Australia, due to low professional skills and academic degree²⁶. Meanwhile, Australia's migration policy during the Covid-

²⁰ Hasmath, R. "Deterring the 'Boat People': Explaining the Australian Government People Swap Response to Asylum Seekers". *Centre on Migration, Policy and Society*. 103. (2013).

²¹ IDP IELTS. *What Is Australia's Points System for Immigration?*. (2022). <https://ielts.com.au/australia/prepare/article-what-is-australias-points-system-for-immigration>

²² Australian Government. *Perm Migration*. (2022). <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/country-profiles/permanent-migration..>

²³ Voigt-Graf, C & Kanemasu, Y. "Labour Mobility in Pacific Island Countries". (2019).

²⁴ Connell, J. & Petrou, K. "Pacific Labour Mobility: Impacts and Futures". *Pacific Updates*. 1019, (2019): 14.

²⁵ Australian Taxation Office. *Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme*. (2022). <https://www.ato.gov.au/business/payg- withholding/in-detail/seasonal-worker-program>

²⁶ Doyle, J., Curtain, S. H. R. & Dornan, M. *Labour Mobility*. Australia National University. (2022). <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800377486.labour.mobility>.

19 pandemic in 2020-2022 prioritized visa for foreign businesses to boost Australia's economy and foreign investment. Thus, Kiribati needs Australia's aid to provide its citizens with foreign language and professional skills training before applying for work in Australia.

Australia's Foreign Aid through the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT) and the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI)

Australia has provided foreign aid for economic development to many countries, including the Pacific Island states through the Australian AID (AusAID)²⁷. Australia allocated \$42.4 million official development assistance (ODA) in 2019-2020 for Kiribati. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic Australia provided less funding for Kiribati, i.e., \$30.5 million in 2021-2022²⁸. Australia ODA is allocated to fund education, provide fresh water supply and waste management facilities in Kiribati²⁹.

In the last ten years, Australia has organized vocational trainings in the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT) to train Kiribati citizens in becoming internationally qualified to work overseas. KIT is an educational and vocational training institute under Kiribati's Ministry of Labor and Human Resources, working together with the Marine Training Center (MTC)³⁰. KIT provides courses on trade and non-trade industrial skills, including, accountancy, automotive, business, public services, construction, electrical engineering, English language, information technology, nursery, plumbing, and hospitality. As a result, 172 students have graduated from KIT in 2015.

Besides KIT, AusAID also provides assistance to develop the Kiribati-Australia Nurses Initiative (KANI). Through this scheme, Australia provided \$20,8 to provide scholarship for Kiribati students to study in Brisbane, Australia³¹. Out of thousands of applicants, 30 students were accepted to participate in KANI, after passing nursery and English language tests. Qualified applicants will need to pass a four months course in

²⁷ Rifaldy, Y. "Melihat Latar Belakang Australia Dalam Memberikan Bantuan Luar Negeri ke Kawasan Pasifik". *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*. 13(2), (2020).

²⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *Kiribati Development cooperation fact sheet*. (2022). <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/development-cooperation-fact-sheet-kiribati.pdf>

²⁹ Faisal, M. D. "Kebijakan Migration with Dignity sebagai Solusi Prioritas Kiribati dalam Merespon Ancaman Sea Level Rise". *Jurnal Analisis Hubungan Internasional*. 5(1), (2016).

³⁰ Kiribati Institute of Technology. *Te Katiteuanaaki Kiribati for Inclusion 10 Years of Skill Training Partnership 2011-2021*. (2022). <https://kit.edu.ki/about-kit>

³¹ O'Brien, L. K. *Migration with Dignity: A Study of The Kiribati-Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI)*. PhD dissertation. University Of Kansas. (2013).

Tarawa, Kiribati. Students are also taught Australian culture, to prepare their visit to Australia.

When KANI participants arrived in Brisbane, they will stay for three months with Australian host families. KANI participants will study for a Diploma degree in Griffith University for 18 months. Afterwards, they will take a Bachelor of Nursery class for 24 months. Once graduated, students could apply for the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) to work in Australia. As a result, 32 students from Kiribati have received Australian Awards scholarship in 2016, in addition to 27 students in 2015.

CONCLUSION

The Government of Kiribati launched Migration with Dignity to provide opportunities for Kiribati citizens to work overseas, especially to Australia. However, the Australian migration policy set a high qualification standard in recruiting international workers. Consequently, not many Kiribati citizens were qualified to work in Australia. In response towards Kiribati's Migration with Dignity policy, Australia provided foreign aid through the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI) for Kiribati citizens to study nursery in Australia and the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT) which provides vocational training and English language courses to improve Kiribati citizens' international qualifications to apply for work in Australia.

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