The Problem is not Covid-19, it’s the Model!
Industrial Agriculture and Migrant Farm Labour in the EU

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Although the debate on how to obtain and ensure a stable labour force for the EU’s agriculture has been going on for decades in both political circles and academic forums, it was not until the arrival of the Covid-19 crisis that this issue was brought to the attention of the general public. The first strict confinements in March 2020 set off all the alarms: who would produce the food we eat when everybody has to stay locked up in their homes?

This issue was not minor, as the widespread closure of borders threatened to prevent foreign workers from moving around and doing their usual work. States such as Portugal, Italy and Spain were quick to offer mass regularisations for those whose irregular status could impede them from accessing their jobs while, within the EU, rapid efforts were made to impose exceptions to allow the internal mobility of these workers.

After this first moment of despair, other debates soon followed. The media began to show the undignified conditions in which many of these indispensable workers lived: precarious housing, lack of access to drinking water and electricity, and so on. The word ‘exploitation’ also began to be used repeatedly to refer to the poor remuneration and harsh working conditions to which agricultural migrants were usually subjected.

The resurgence of the virus, since these poor conditions were the perfect breeding ground for the outbreak of new infections.

Following these debates, this article will seek to explain how the development of the industrial agricultural model in Europe, and mainly in Spain and Italy, has been largely based on the employment of migrant workers in precarious conditions. In this way, it will be understood that, although the Covid-19 crisis has raised new issues, in reality, this is a long-standing structural problem which the pandemic has only accentuated. The aim of this reflection will thus be to stimulate a discussion on how to tackle reforms, in the short term, to change the way a large part of the European agricultural sector functions in order to avoid these social problems in the future.

**Industrial agriculture in Southern Europe**

Throughout the 20th century, a ‘traditional’ agricultural model predominated in the European area. In general, in EU Member States such as Spain and Italy, the productive units were primarily family-owned and were composed of peasants; these also coexisted with major extensions of crops which, however, tended to be oriented towards local markets. In this context, production depended on factors such as the season and climate, which meant that the movement of day labourers was constant throughout the year.

The global changes in agricultural markets would change this picture. The proliferation of free trade agreements, the formation of large economic spaces (such as the EU itself), and the accessibility of new production technologies have reconfigured the European agricultural landscape. Following the characteristic model of California, various rural spaces have thus undergone a profound transformation, becoming agro-exporting enclaves with an industrial type of production (Pedraño Cánovas, 2014).

The industrialisation of agriculture is understood as the process of passing from ‘petty commodity production to capitalist production, with a shift to wage labour, increasing capital investment, and intensified competition leading to rapid agglomeration of enterprises’ (FitzSimmons, 1986, p. 336). This model is also characterised by applying a Fordist production logic, together with incorporating agrochemicals and technologies such as greenhouses. All of this, of course, is oriented towards reducing production times and costs while significantly increasing the volume of commodities produced, which attracts large capital investors since it generates millions of euros in profits.

Progressively, certain territories adopted this model, and industrial agricultural areas proliferated throughout the continent. This process, however, was not uniform in Europe,
but rather the common market produced a division of labour in which the Mediterranean territories, particularly Spain and Italy, producers of about 40 per cent of fresh products in the EU (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020), specialised in this type of production.

Industrial agriculture was praised and promoted by the business community and the public authorities who saw in this model both a commercial opportunity and a way to promote food sovereignty in the EU, in line with the message of the ‘green revolution’ (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016). However, despite the fact that the social consensus surrounding the implementation of this model allowed for its rapid progression (López-Sala, 2016), this did not prevent it from encountering a fundamental problem: obtaining an effective workforce.

In the ‘traditional’ model, family groups and itinerant labourers were sufficient to work the crops, and therefore a huge amount of labour was not required. The industrial model, however, requires a large number of waged workers, and that soon became a production problem.

This difficulty was compounded by several factors. The first was economic: the growth of EU economies brought new labour opportunities in the cities, with jobs that were better paid and less arduous than those in agriculture, leading many people to migrate from rural to urban areas. The second factor was demographic: not only were young people migrating to the city, but agricultural producers were also aging and not being replaced (López-Sala, 2016). Two opposing social phenomena thus occurred within the same time frame: more labour than ever was needed in the primary sector – at least during certain periods of time – while rural spaces were progressively losing population. Eventually, this equation was solved through the employment of migrant workers (Corrado et al., 2017).

**Employing migrants in European agriculture**

The existing link between migration and the agricultural sector finds several explanatory factors in addition to those already mentioned.

First, it should be noted that this is a global phenomenon. The employment of migrant workers in the agricultural sector in advanced economies has been growing steadily since the 1940s, when the United States created the first Bracero programme to bring Mexican workers into California’s agriculture. Since then, several countries, such as Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia, have seen how their agricultural labour force has been increasingly ‘migrantised’. Nowadays migrants have become a structural productive element in the majority of the advanced economies in Europe, America, Asia and the Pacific (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020).

The employment of migrants in Europe’s agriculture resulted, on the one hand, in bringing a large contingent of workers into the new industrial enclaves and, on the other hand, in lowering the price of production (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016). This factor is fundamental, since, among other relevant factors, the...
Free-trade agreements signed by the EU intensified global competition, with low food prices being a determining element in ensuring the competitiveness of European producers. Southern European Member States' labour legislations were also a key element as they established minimum wages that were much lower than other competitors on the continent, which contributed to Mediterranean companies being able to take over larger segments of the EU's food markets.

Not only are Spain and Italy the two EU states where these processes have exerted the greatest impact, but they also represent two different models for obtaining labour. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, economic growth turned both countries into immigration destinations, where they had traditionally been territories of emigration. Among the migrants who began to arrive in growing numbers, a large proportion lacked a residence or work permit, leaving them in an irregular situation. This was one of the first conditions for them to be 'channelled' into agriculture, a sector traditionally characterised by informality and lack of labour controls.

Agriculture therefore became a 'refuge sector' (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016) since it allowed jobs to be found for those who were in an irregular condition. Thus, until the beginning of the 21st century, not only did agriculture obtain a large part of its required labour force thanks to migration, but also, by employing workers in an irregular situation, the primary sector in both Italy and Spain was able to enjoy a competitive advantage. Compared to other Member States where there were greater controls, employers in both countries lowered costs by not declaring to the public administrations a large part of the contracts; this was possible as employing irregular migrants leaves no trace at the Social Security offices, so they could avoid paying taxes and they could also pay wages way below the legal minimum threshold.

In Spain, certain mass regularisations as well as the strength of sectors such as construction, which offered better working conditions to migrants, led to a gradual decline in the number of workers available to toil in the fields and therefore a progressive reduction in the incidence of irregularity in the sector. In Italy, on the other hand, the constant arrival of irregular migrants meant that, despite recurrent mass regularisations, this labour was always readily available for the sector (Corrado et al., 2017).

In addition, in the case of several Spanish enclaves where seasonal production predominated, such as strawberries in Huelva and pome fruits in Lleida, the drop in the number of available irregular workers implied structural changes. The prospect of an insufficient number of workers made employers ask the national government to implement a temporary migration programme that would allow labourers to be recruited directly from third countries. ‘Recruitment at origin’, the name adopted by this programme, was thus implemented with Eastern European countries, notably Poland and Romania, as well as with Colombia (in the case of Lleida) and Morocco (López-Sala, 2016).

The programme was considered a success by the authorities and even by the EU, which financed it in part as a test case to promote similar initiatives throughout the Union (Medland, 2017). However, two elements would hold back its use: the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements and the 2008 global economic crisis.

This second point led the Spanish government to freeze the programme in order to promote the employment of unemployed nationals and foreigners already residing in Spain, while the first point meant the opening of new channels to recruit foreign workers at a low cost (López-Sala, 2016).
recruitment at origin and the fall in irregularity to be circumnavigated, while in Italy the arrival of these workers enabled employers to enjoy the benefits of a new contingent competing downwards for wages with irregular migrants (Corrado et al., 2017).

Since the 2007 EU enlargement, both Member States have seen Romania become the main supplier of farm-workers to Spain and Italy’s industrial agricultural enclaves.

A devastating model at the social level, enhanced by Covid-19

As has already been explained in this article, a fundamental characteristic of the productive scheme in industrial agricultural enclaves is to produce food at low cost (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016). However, that which contributes to making them competitive at a European (and also global) level has a direct consequence on workers’ conditions: labour exploitation.

A large part of the EU’s fresh fruit and vegetable production is competitive because employers in southern Europe pay low wages, sometimes even below the legal thresholds. This fact has been widely reported in research (Corrado et al., 2017; Gertel and Sippel, 2014; Rye and O’Reilly, 2020), where other exploitative strategies are commonplace, such as the use of illegal intermediaries (the Caporali in southern Italy) and social security fraud involving (among others) the declaration of fewer days worked and non-payment of overtime.

Another social problem associated with this exploitative model has to do with the housing conditions of migrants. The proliferation of slums, the occupation of unhealthy spaces such as abandoned factories, and the lack of drinking water and electricity are elements common to some of the spaces where these workers are forced to reside. Conditions tend to improve when companies provide accommodation on their farms, although in many cases other problems arise, such as overcrowding and the limited provision of basic infrastructure where the facilities provided to sleep and work are barely sufficient. As can be deduced, these constitute serious social problems.

The strict dependence of southern Europe’s agriculture (but also of other sectors in other Member States, like German slaughterhouses for instance) on the migration of poor, low-waged people means that a large part of the EU’s primary sector is based on maintaining chronic inequality both within Member States (which profit in part from the exploitation of irregular migrants) and between Member States.

This scenario has been denounced by numerous investigations in recent decades (Corrado et al., 2017; Gertel and Sippel, 2014; Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016; Rye and O’Reilly, 2020) without much improvement of the situation. The Covid-19 crisis, however, has opened a new opportunity for awareness by bringing this problem to the attention of the general public since the agri-food sector became particularly relevant especially during the first confinements.

At a time when unprecedented restrictions were placed on citizen mobility, the agricultural sector trembled, due to its chronic dependence on migrant labour. The Communication C/2020/2051 from the European Commission on 30 March 2020 sought to address this problem by including seasonal agricultural workers among the exceptions to the restrictions on mobility. This managed to partially solve the problem because, as many Member States depended on the work of these migrants, a ‘competition’ began where many ended up migrating to places, such as Germany, that offered better wages than Mediterranean countries.

Both for fear of failing to receive the necessary workers from Romania, and to prevent irregular migrants from being arrested by the police while going to work, the Spanish and Italian governments announced specific regularisations for these groups. In Spain, no regularisations were finally carried out as growers found ways to obtain the required workforce. The remaining Moroccan workers from the programme combined with those Romanian workers who managed to arrive were apparently enough. In addition, the national Government also offered temporary permits for unaccompanied migrant minors willing to do agricultural work. In Italy, a special regularisation for irregular migrants was launched, although only 30,000 workers (compared to the 600,000 expected by the government) acceded to it.
These measures, together with the progressive lifting of restrictions, led to a certain ‘normalisation’ in the sector which later encountered a new problem. In Spain, in the midst of de-escalation, several outbreaks of Covid-19 infection (for instance in provinces like Leida or in Aragon, in Spain) were linked to migrant agricultural workers. This also happened in some slaughterhouses in Germany. In other cases, for instance in Lepe (Huelva, Spain), the shanty town where a significant number of migrant farmworkers lived was burned by a fire supposedly caused by far-rightultras. This social tension was denounced by the vast majority of social actors who pointed out that the previously explained conditions of precariousness and misery, together with the lack of care by employers in the workplace, were the real cause of the spread of the virus in these scenarios.

Rethink the model

A large part of European agricultural production is based on a model that promotes a precarious mobility by offering the type of work that can only be described as ‘exploitative’. The competitiveness of southern Europe in global agricultural chains is partly based on cheap production, which is only possible by offering poorly paid jobs to poor people (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016). Moreover, not only does the reduction of costs concern wages, which sometimes are far below the legal minimum, but it is also based on insufficient housing policies, which result in the proliferation of slums and other types of substandard housing.

Covid-19 has not produced this context, but has brought it to the table for public debate, since food production has taken an unprecedented centre stage in social debate. This whole model needs to be rethought. Despite the fact that the EU, and mainly its southern Member States, generate tons of fresh food on European territory, the reality is that it is impossible to talk about food sovereignty when its production depends on the annual displacement of thousands of workers from both third countries and those European states with fewer resources (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020).

The European agricultural model needs to be reimagined so that the perpetuation of migrants’ exploitation can be halted.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) should enable fruit and vegetables to be produced free of exploitation. In 2003, this issue was discussed during the Fischler reform, when a conditionality to receive CAP funds was proposed to be linked with decent labour conditions; unfortunately, the Council of Europe declined to approve it. Today, probably because of the public notoriety that working and living conditions of migrant farmworkers have obtained in the media during the pandemic, this issue is again being discussed in the CAP reform and is included in the final European Parliament negotiating mandate.

If agriculture offered stable and well-paid jobs, there would be no need to employ irregular migrants and poor workers from the most disadvantaged areas of the EU. Good financing linked to the conditionality of offering decent work together with the strengthening of labour inspections, should create a positive context without excessively increasing production costs. Moreover, better wages would give workers much more scope for decent residential accommodation which, in the context of a pandemic, would lead to greater social protection.

The European agricultural model needs to be reimagined so that the perpetuation of inequality can be halted through no longer favouring the creation of poor workers in agricultural enclaves.

Covid-19 will eventually pass, but if action is not taken to promote decent work environments in Europe’s agricultural enclaves, then the sustainability of the system will be threatened in the short term, which in turn can generate, in the near future, major problems for the prosperity and stability of the EU as a whole.

Further Reading

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The Problem is not Covid-19, it’s the Model!

Industrielle Landwirtschaft und Wanderarbeitskräfte in der EU

The Covid-19 crisis has shed light on two structural problems that affect a large part of the European model of industrial fruit and vegetable production, mainly in Spain and Italy: excessive dependence on foreign labour and the appalling social and working conditions of these migrant workers. Despite the current intense debates that have arisen on this topic, this is not a new issue but a chronic problem, which has characterised much of the agricultural production in the EU for over two decades. In order to understand how and why this point has been reached, a historical review of the evolution of the primary sector, mainly in southern Europe, and its link to migration, is carried out to ascertain whether the pandemic has aggravated the terrible consequences, mainly for migrant workers, of a socially unsustainable model. The aim is to lay the foundations for a debate on the direction in which European agriculture is heading, and which contributions, such as reforming the CAP and conditioning its funds to decent working conditions can be made towards building a fairer and more sustainable model over time.

La crise de la Covid-19 a mis en lumière deux problèmes structurels qui touchent une grande partie du modèle européen de production industrielle de fruits et légumes, principalement en Espagne et en Italie : la dépendance excessive à la main-d’œuvre étrangère et les conditions sociales et de travail épouvantables de ces travailleurs migrants. Malgré les débats actuels intenses qui ont surgi sur ce sujet, il ne s’agit pas d’une question nouvelle mais d’un problème chronique, qui caractérise une grande partie de la production agricole dans l’Union européenne depuis plus de deux décennies. Afin de comprendre comment et pourquoi la situation en est arrivée à ce point, un bilan historique de l’évolution du secteur primaire, principalement dans le sud de l’Europe, et de son lien avec la migration, est réalisé pour vérifier si la pandémie a aggravé les terribles conséquences, principalement pour les travailleurs migrants, d’un modèle socialement insoutenable. L’objectif est de jeter les bases d’un débat sur la direction de l’agriculture européenne et sur les contributions, telles que la réforme de la Politique agricole commune et le conditionnement de ses financements à des conditions de travail décentes, susceptibles de permettre la construction un modèle plus juste et plus durable à l’avenir.

Die Covid-19-Krise hat ein Schlaglicht auf zwei strukturelle Probleme geworfen. Sie betreffen einen großen Teil des europäischen Modells der industriellen Obst- und Gemüseproduktion, vor allem in Spanien und Italien: zum einen die zu große Abhängigkeit von ausländischen Arbeitskräften sowie die entsetzlichen sozialen Bedingungen und Arbeitsumstände dieser Wanderarbeitskräfte. Trotz der derzeit intensiv geführten Debatten zu diesem Thema handelt es sich nicht um ein neues, sondern um ein chronisches Problem, das einen Großteil der landwirtschaftlichen Produktion in der EU seit über zwei Jahrzehnten prägt. Um zu verstehen, wie und warum dieser Punkt erreicht wurde, haben wir einen historischen Rückblick zur Entwicklung des Primärsektors mit Fokus auf Südeuropa durchgeführt und dabei die Verbindung des Primärsektors zur Migration untersucht. Die Untersuchung gilt der Fragestellung, ob die Pandemie die schrecklichen Folgen eines sozial unhaltbaren Modells, vor allem für Wanderarbeitskräfte, verschärft hat. Ziel ist es, den Grundstein für eine Diskussion über die Richtung zu legen, in die sich die europäische Landwirtschaft entwickelt. Dabei soll es darum gehen, welche Beiträge geleistet werden können, wie z.B. die Reform der GAP und die Verknüpfung ihrer Mittel an menschenwürdige Arbeit, um im Laufe der Zeit ein gerechteres und nachhaltigeres Modell aufzubauen.