

First Received: 9 September 2020
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v17i5.1153>

Editorial: Foreign seasonal migrants in agriculture and COVID-19

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Abstract

Foreign seasonal migrants fill labour shortages in host countries if employers do not or cannot find available short-term labour from among the country's own labour reserves. In reality, it is difficult to find seasonal workers from among the native population ready to work in the primary sector, making the sector highly dependent on a foreign workforce. Migration Letters as an international journal addresses the diversity of human migration and mobility, which includes a wide range of dynamic aspects affecting the modern world. The current fifth issue of volume 17 of the journal includes multi-sided content on the topic from papers around the world. It includes papers dealing with refugees, asylum seekers, displaced populations, migrant workers, job-education mismatch, the language proficiency of migrants, their personal networks and sex traffickers.

Keywords: migration; seasonal migrants; COVID-19; collective insecurity.

Introduction

A large number of migrants move for work-related reasons on a temporary basis. Seasonal migration is one increasing form of temporary human migration, which can occur both within the country as well as internationally. The common feature is that work is available for part of the year and there is a certain high season when temporary labour is heavily needed. Well-known examples of seasonal migrants include seasonal employees engaged in primary production, i.e. in agriculture and forestry, including berry picking on farms, and in other economic sectors covering wild berry picking in the forests, and tourism.

Foreign seasonal migrants fill labour shortages in host countries if employers do not or cannot find available short-term labour from among the country's own labour reserves. In reality, it is difficult to find seasonal workers from among the native population ready to work in the primary sector, making the sector highly dependent on a foreign workforce.

When looking at development trends in Finland, the professional cultivation of berries began in the 1960s. Still in the 1980s, Finnish youngsters were hired to pick berries during their summer holidays. "Going to work for the summer in the strawberry fields of Suonenjoki", a city in central Finland famous of its strawberries, was a popular saying at the time. In the 1990s, foreign seasonal labour started to arrive in Finland: first they came from Estonia, then from Russia, and nowadays mainly from Ukraine and Belorussia (see Konttinen, 2020). According to Kavén (2020), the farms had to start searching for cheaper labour because of the price level of the products. When berries and vegetables started to be imported at a low price from abroad, the prices of domestic products had to be lowered, too. This in turn reduced the payroll capacity of farmers.

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Foreign seasonal workers from Ukraine point out that one of the main pull factors to come to Finland is, however, the higher salary level. They say that the rate of 9 euros per hour is many times higher than the salary for a similar job in Ukraine. According to the World Bank (2020), Ukraine's per capita GDP was US\$3,659 in 2019. Seasonal workers can invest in their origin country: for instance, they can buy an apartment or a house or renovate a dwelling, buy a car or invest in their children's education. For Ukraine, remittances constitute an essential input for the national economy. The National Bank of Ukraine estimates that, based on preliminary data, 2019 remittances from Ukrainians working abroad amounted to US\$12 billion, some 7.8 per cent of the country's entire GDP (Current time, 2020). Many Ukrainians are quite familiar with and skilled in agricultural work. Agricultural products and food industry products accounted for nearly 48 per cent of the total export of Ukrainian goods between January 2019 and January 2020 (Ukrinform, 2020).

Seasonal farm work requires professionalism, and those engaged in it are not so-called unskilled workers. Klocker et al. (2019) conceptualise this idea with four points. First, "manual" work is not unskilled, even when it seems to be occurring instinctively or unconsciously. Second, skilled work involves withing one's hands, materials, tools and machines and is not just "manual" work; it is also knowledge work because skill is more than "the mere application of mechanical force", as it involves "care, judgement and dexterity". Third, hands-on work occurs through ongoing dialogue with materials and environment, in ways that always exceed instructions, plans or designs, i.e. workers are constantly reasoning and adapting their practice to fit the circumstances. Fourth, narrow definitions of knowledge demean certain workers, setting a framework for their exploitation.

Many seasonal migrants can be classified as circular migrants, which refers to repeated migration experiences between a point of origin and destination involving more than one migration and return migration. They bring back enhanced skills and new ideas to the home community and can help develop networks with destination countries (Hugo, 2013). Seasonal and circular migrants can return to the host country, even to the same farm, to do the same work as in previous years. In this case, employers do not have to expend so much effort or resources in training and guiding the workers.

Farmers themselves had to learn human resource management: ensuring that once a worker had been hired, that person would return the next year. Countries also compete for the same workers: it is important to ensure that foreign seasonal workers feel themselves welcome and also consider the host country attractive in the future. They bring their personal views to the home country. In the best case, a positive recommendation in the sphere of their social network can lead to chain seasonal migration to the same destination country and even to the same farm.

Effects of COVID-19

Spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic and human mobility have been linked in an earlier study published in *Migration Letters* (Sirkeci and Yucesahin, 2020) and yet further impact of the pandemic on human mobility is slowly unfolding. In Europe, at the height of the coronavirus crisis in March 2020, the German government closed the country's borders and capped the number of seasonal workers allowed to enter the country at 80,000. In June, Germany eased entry restrictions for these workers. From 16 June until the end of the year 2020, seasonal workers from the European Union and the passport-free Schengen zone are once again allowed to freely enter Germany to help harvest crops. German farms usually require some 300,000 foreign harvest workers a year, mainly from Poland and Romania (Euractive.com, 2020).



When looking at the Nordic countries during COVID-19, the Federation of Swedish Farmers said in mid-May of 2020 that around 8,000 seasonal workers were needed in the forestry and gardening sectors. Later on Sweden's farms and forestry industry have not suffered a feared labour shortage due to the coronavirus because workers from other countries came to Sweden after restrictions were lifted for seasonal agricultural workers. Seasonal migration for work has continued, including labour from outside the EU, after exemptions were granted by the Swedish government and the European Union. They decided that seasonal agricultural workers would be excluded from the travel bans (Dammberg, 2020). The Norwegian Agrarian Association stated that 20,000 to 30,000 seasonal workers are needed in Norway (Östling, 2020).

In Finland, during a so-called normal year 16,000 seasonal workers from abroad are engaged in agricultural work. The Finnish government (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2020) decided at the end of May 2020 that in addition to the entry of 4,500 seasonal workers, on which a decision had been made earlier, a further 4,500 seasonal workers from third countries could come to Finland beginning 1 June to meet the needs in primary production. The majority of seasonal workers' permits are processed by the Finnish Immigration Service, which also makes the decisions on the permits. The final decision on entry into the country is made by the Border Guard. People arriving in Finland are still recommended to stay in quarantine-like conditions for 14 days.

In the early spring of 2020, Ukraine did not let its citizens travel to Finland or other foreign countries for seasonal work in order to avoid spread of the virus pandemic. In early May, Ukraine finally permitted seasonal workers to travel abroad. Ukraine insisted that there should be a work contract for at least three months, that the salary level had to be decent and also that good living conditions, healthcare and necessary insurance would be provided (Uber, 2020).

Access to a seasonal migrant labour force is critical during COVID-19 to guarantee a continuous supply of farm products to the shops and consumers. The demand for domestic berries and vegetables is constantly increasing. To secure the successful recruitment of foreign workers in Finland, interested parties have turned to social media campaigns, creating a new Work from Finland (Töitä Suomesta, 2020) web service and To the Farms (Maatilalle.fi, 2020) web service in the agricultural sector for employers to inform foreign workers searching for a job about open vacancies. Also, the campaigns have looked for seasonal workers from domestic labour pools, like students and immigrant-background persons. The legislation on the right of asylum seekers to work has been temporarily amended as of 29 June 2020. The act will remain in force until 31 October 2020. The amendment will temporarily extend the right to work to asylum seekers in fields that offer seasonal work, i.e. in agriculture, forestry, horticulture or fisheries (Finnish Immigration Service, 2020).

Migration flows are nowadays more diverse and complex, and patterns are multi-layered (Heikkilä, 2020). There is a need for more research on temporary migration, including seasonal and circular migration, as their numbers are increasing year by year. The national statistics rarely provide information on these forms of human migration. To better understand the global dimensions of temporary migration, surveys and panel data are needed that can provide information on these phenomena across time and space (Zimmermann, 2014).

New issue of Migration Letters

Migration Letters as an international journal addresses the diversity of human migration and mobility, which includes a wide range of dynamic aspects affecting the modern world. The current

fifth issue of volume 17 of the journal includes multi-sided content on the topic from papers around the world. It includes papers dealing with refugees, asylum seekers, displaced populations, migrant workers, job-education mismatch, the language proficiency of migrants, COVID-19 impact, Hukou system in China, migrants' personal networks and sex traffickers.

Teodorowski explores how micro-level activities, such as education in local schools, lifelong learning and community activities delivered within the council area, influence the integration of refugees. It is based on a case study of one Scottish council, which decided to welcome Syrian refugees in 2015 and had no prior experience with refugee relocation. Refugees are also dealt with in **Kayaoglu Yilmaz's** paper, which looks at the informal textile sector in a rather homogenous urban neighbourhood in Istanbul, where the main competition for jobs are between Kurds and Syrians. The paper shows that employment rates for natives declined in that specific field due to other factors unrelated to the Syrians, beginning before the Syrians had arrived, not after. **García-Juan's** paper focuses on integration measures within the reformed Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the unsolved limbo of asylum seekers.

Xie investigates the hukou system, i.e. horizontal, vertical and full job-education mismatch and wage progression among the floating college population in Beijing, China. **Ganjour, Widmer, Viry, Gauthier, Kaufmann** and **Drevon** examine how residential trajectories influence the spatiality and composition of personal networks in Switzerland. Three mechanisms are considered: the addition of spatially close network members, the selection of spatially distant network members and the substitution of spatially distant network members with spatially close ones.

Angulo's research focus is on knowing the variables that make it possible to predict the spending level for displaced victims that returned to La Palma, Cundinamarca, Colombia. Migrant workers are analysed in **Sabban's** paper, which examines the historical and contemporary evolution of migrant domestic work in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. This fifth issue also presents **Izcara Palacios's** research, which analyses the strategies used by sex traffickers to recruit women from Mexico and Central America to satisfy the demands of the illegal US sex industry.

Diekmann and **Fröhlich** conduct detailed quantitative analyses of how various language variables influence migrants' social position in Germany, by which they mean the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI). The ISEI is mainly based on occupation, but also on education and income. *What Money Can't Buy: Educational Aspirations and International Migration in Ecuador* is an intriguing study by **Arias-Medina** and **Rivera** drawing on a multilevel survey and structured interviews.

Bhagat and colleagues are offering an early insight into the COVID-19 plight in India and its impact on human mobility in the sub-continent. **Lumayag** and colleagues are reflecting on human insecurity and the Pandemic in Malaysia as they argue that the collective experience of insecurity among migrant workers can be framed at both individual and structural levels.

Maniruzzaman Al Masud, Binti Hamzah and **Ahmad's** case study highlights the role and contribution of imported labour to the Malaysian economy. Most of the migrant workers are low-skilled or uneducated, and much public debate is taking place regarding their outcome, whether it is substantial or not. Final paper in this issue is a report by **Huxter** as on 9-10th September 2019 academics from universities around the UK met at Loughborough University to discuss working with children and young people, particularly those with a migrant/diasporic background.



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