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Policy Brief

Circular migration in Spain: good practice?

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Introduction

Several international organisations have considered Spain's circular migration programme (known as "Collective Management of Recruitment at Origin", in Spanish 'Gestión Colectiva de las contrataciones en Origen' or GECCO) to be an example of good practice (López-Sala, 2016). So did the European Commission, which took the "Spanish model" as the basis for drawing up the EU's directive on seasonal workers (Directive 2014/36/EU). With that in mind, it funded the Aeneas-Cartaya project (2006) to test its operation with the hiring of Moroccan farm labourers to work in the strawberry fields of Huelva. Whether the GECCO programme constitutes good practice to be replicated in other contexts remains an open question, however. Over the last few years, media outlets and academic researchers have reported numerous cases of abuse and mistreatment of women migrant workers in Huelva. This policy brief aims to answer the question by drawing on a debate held in

September 2025 at a seminar on the GECCO programme organised by Universidad de Comillas and CIDOB for the European projects [DignityFIRM](#) and [Safehabitus](#). The main stakeholders took part, from employers' organisations and trade unions to third sector bodies, Spain's labour inspectorate, the Spanish Embassy in Morocco and academic researchers.

The brief first describes the programme's characteristics and how it has evolved over time. Second, it examines its strengths and weaknesses. And third, it ends with a series of specific recommendations to improve it.

A programme spanning 25 years

If employers in Spain fail to fill a vacancy from the available workforce in the domestic labour market, they are permitted to recruit migrant workers in their countries of origin. They might be repeat workers who have been hired by

the same employer before. Or they could be new workers, selected in their country of origin by the employers (or employers' organisations), a process in which the Spanish authorities and those of the country of origin are also represented.

The GECCO programme stipulates that the employer is responsible for handling the visas for the migrant workers to enter the country. They must also organise the journey and cover the cost of the return ticket as well as provide workers with decent accommodation. The workers, meanwhile, must honour the commitment to return to their country of origin when the work contract ends (it has a maximum duration of nine months, though the typical stay normally lasts between three and six months). Failure to comply with this obligation will result in denial of future work permits. Workers who do fulfil these obligations have priority in future recruitment campaigns.

As for the employment conditions, foreign workers under the GECCO programme have practically the same rights as domestic workers, including social and healthcare entitlements, although they are not eligible for unemployment benefit, for example. Supervision of living and working conditions is in the hands of the local authorities, often in collaboration with NGOs. Employers' organisations and trade unions have also organised their own monitoring schemes (one is known

as PRELSI, or "Plan for Ethical, Labour, Social and Equality Responsibility").

The GECCO programme has passed through various stages in its 25-year history (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020). Following some pilot projects, the first programmes were launched in 2001. The leading regions were Huelva and Lleida, as their crops (primarily red fruits and seed fruits, respectively) are highly seasonal, meaning employers need large numbers of workers for limited periods. In the 2007–2008 campaign, when the largest number of workers arrived, employers in Huelva hired around 40,000 workers and in Lleida the number was roughly 7,000 (Díaz, Márquez and Jurado, 2014).

The economic crisis of 2008 marked a turning point. With unemployment rising rapidly, the Spanish government decided to put the programme on hold to promote jobs for workers (national or otherwise) already living in the country (López-Sala, 2016). It was a freeze rather than a ban, as some labourers, particularly those repeating stays and those working in the fields rather than packing, continued to come.

Despite the freeze on the GECCO, migrant workers remained predominant in agriculture (Molinero, 2018). First, because many unemployed migrant workers who were already in Spain returned to the sector (a rather considerable proportion had left it in search of better conditions) (López-Sala, 2013). And second, because employers

continued to recruit in the countries of origin, but outside the GECCO. This “individual”, “spontaneous” or “private” hiring – that is, not promoted by the state – was facilitated by the fact that the countries of Eastern Europe, particularly Romania and Bulgaria, had joined the EU, meaning recruitment in these countries was possible outside this system without the obligation to go through the national employment agency. In addition, prior networks of former employees and their respective friends, family members or acquaintances expedited contact with new workers.

Since 2016, the Spanish government has increased the quotas. Consequently, in Huelva the annual number of workers rose from 2,178 in 2015 to 5,041 in 2016 and around 20,000 since 2019, with a two-year hiatus during the pandemic (Güell and Garcés, 2020). Unlike Huelva, in Lleida the number of workers hired through the GECCO remained minimal. Most of the GECCO workers in Huelva are rural Moroccan women with little or no formal education as well as family ties (young children) to ensure they return home when the contract comes to an end. Since the pandemic, workers from other parts of the world have begun to arrive, notably from Ecuador, Honduras, Senegal and, more recently, Guatemala.

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths:

For migrant workers, it offers job opportunities to people who may find themselves in a precarious situation in their countries of origin. The salary in comparative terms is much higher. In Huelva, for example, Moroccan women labourers can earn seven times as much as they do in their own country. The programme also allows travelling back and forth between countries, which in the early years of residency (with temporary permits) is sometimes difficult.

For employers, it ensures the availability of necessary labour, especially in sectors where it is hard to find. In Huelva’s case, there are 30,000 people in the agricultural sector who are unemployed, but they are unwilling to work in the fields. In 2025, for example, only 100 of the 11,000 vacancies in this sector were filled locally. Foreign workers by comparison are ready to agree to conditions and pay nationals or residents in Spain would scarcely accept. The fact that the residency permit is tied to a certain employer, moreover, ensures that workers do not “escape” to other, better-paid sectors with more favourable working conditions, safeguarding the stability of the workforce throughout the season.

For the states, it reinforces bilateral relations, favouring cooperation on

migration but also in geopolitical terms. It could mean significant sums of money for the countries of origin. The European Commission-funded AENEAS programme, for example, resulted in a sizeable inflow of resources for Morocco. So far, however, the number of workers hired has been too limited to make a difference in terms of remittances. For the destination countries, moreover, this mechanism enables a lawful, steady and orderly management of migration, and it could be a partial solution to irregular immigration. It also ensures the workers are paying into the social security system, with access to public services from the first day. The workers who arrive under a circular immigration programme can be a key part of the economy. In Huelva, for example, they account for 10–15% of farm labourers in a crucial economic sector (red fruits) that makes up 11% of the province's GDP.

Weaknesses:

For migrant workers, their stay in the country is temporary, which means they can remain no longer than the time stipulated in the contract. Spanish law provides for the possibility of acquiring more permanent status after completing several seasons following the rules. But in practice few achieve it as it requires an offer of a steady job, which is difficult to find in this sector. Overstaying the visa in breach of the obligation to return home means slipping into irregular status. Some women who decided to

stay have ended up being victims of trafficking, for example, in the fields of Almeria. While most agricultural employers respect the agreement and workers' rights, various organisations and studies have warned that abusive situations persist and appear to be more common than would be acceptable. Reliance on employers, on who the residence permit and the chance of coming back depend, precludes switching employer and in practice limits a worker's capacity to report mistreatment. Another significant problem is the fact that in the agricultural sector working hours are set from day to day, depending on needs and the weather, which means the days worked and, therefore, the level of income is not established beforehand. Lastly, it is the Spanish government that unilaterally decides the annual quotas, which, as happened in 2008 when the quotas were kept to a minimum, can mean many female workers whose families depend on those incomes are left without a job.

For employers, recruitment via GECCO is unsuitable if the contract lasts more than nine months, when a stable contract would be more appropriate, or less than three, in which case this pathway is no longer cost-effective. Nor is it suitable when the start of the activity cannot be planned in advance. The administrative procedures to obtain approval are long, because it involves

going through the employment offices and then organising the recruitment at origin, always in the confines of the government-approved quotas.

For the states, there is a dual dependency. First, the states sending migrants depend on those receiving them, since it is the latter who decide the annual quota according to their needs. And second, the destination states depend on the employers, as it is they who ultimately decide whether to hire workers and in which country. For example, the Spanish government's bilateral deals with The Gambia (2006), Guinea (2006), Cape Verde (2006), Mali (2006) and Senegal (2007), where recruitment at origin was promised in return for greater control of migration by these states, were not fulfilled because they failed to secure the cooperation of the employers, who preferred to hire their workers elsewhere (Garcés, 2012).

Recommendations

Improve support processes. Employers' organisations, trade unions and third sector bodies already provide support for the female seasonal workers in Huelva (for example, supplying information in several languages, mediation, practical guides to accommodation, workers' guides, and so on). It would be useful, however, to enhance this support with a greater effort to raise the female workers'

awareness, providing information on the conditions in their contracts and their rights, prior to departure and after, in terms of contributions (and the possibility of transferring them to their countries of origin) and rights of return. It would also be helpful to reopen the seasonal workers' advice bureaus, which were operating until 2011 and provided a crucial point of support during the months working in Spain. Likewise, training programmes should be improved, also at origin and with regard to the language. Lastly, it is important to provide better mediation services in the event of a dispute, increasing the ratio of mediators and ensuring their independence – in other words, avoiding their hiring by one of the parties involved (normally the employers).

Improve coordination among administrations. Bearing in mind that responsibilities are shared among different levels of the administration (state, regional and local, and among different areas such as employment, immigration and foreign affairs) and that different non-state actors are involved (employers, trade unions and NGOs) coordination among them should be improved. Previously, there was a state board and provincial counterparts that ensured day-to-day monitoring and coordination where all the stakeholders were represented. They should be convened again and on a regular basis.

Improve oversight mechanisms.

Although the programme is highly regulated, by a 22-page order and 19 annexes, stricter enforcement of the law is lacking. To that end, more labour inspectors are needed. In Huelva, for instance, there are 7,900 cases assigned to the Labour Inspectorate (30% of them in the agricultural sector) and a total of 29 inspectors to handle them. There is therefore a dearth of capacity and resources. In addition, working hours records should be digitalised in every company, which would facilitate access and oversight. There should also be greater control over housing conditions, which often fall short of the standards laid down by law. Similarly, the mechanisms for workers to report mistreatment should be reinforced. It would also be useful to reinstate the presence of civil society organisations as observers, as was the practice in 2009.

Expand services during the cultivation and harvest season. This applies particularly to healthcare services, which should be stepped up in proportion to the increase in population.

Make conditions obligatory. Although the GECCO lays down specific working and housing conditions throughout the order and in its 19 annexes, in many cases they are mere recommendations that are considered “appropriate”. A number of these recommendations should be made compulsory to ensure

that minimum legal standards and norms are complied with. Likewise, the terms and conditions of EU directive on seasonal workers (Directive 2014/36/EU) are often vague and too open to interpretation and clearer national guidance on its implementation should be prepared (Molinero and González Ferrer, 2018).

Improve conditions for workers. To extend the working time in Spain, particularly when they are short periods, it should be made easier to work successive contracts with different employers in different regions. To prevent dependence on one employer curtailing a worker’s capacity to report possible abuses, it should be made easier to switch employer. To ensure incomes are stable and predictable, there should also be a cap on variable working hours based on labour needs. To prevent isolation and foster contact with the local population, accommodation outside urban areas should be avoided and, consequently, transport should be improved so that workers can travel both to and from the workplace and move independently through the territory.

Transparent and public data as the basis for regular evaluation. The analysis and publication of data are crucial to evaluate any public policy. There is room for improvement here, too. That includes the release of data

each year in terms of workers recruited, their origin, characteristics, type of work, the nature of the accommodation, support programmes and so on. The annual reports of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) should also be made public. As well as data, the authorities should carry out an evaluation from year to year to resolve any issues that might arise.

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About DignityFIRM

Towards becoming sustainable and resilient societies we must address the structural contradictions between our societies' exclusion of migrant workers and their substantive role in producing our food.

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