

## **Policy Brief**

# **Dignity for migrant workers in agriculture**

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### Introduction

The working and living conditions of agricultural workers are far from optimal. Their labour precariousness is not accidental; rather, it is a structural feature of the sector. This is why those willing to work in agriculture are mostly immigrants: either because they have no alternatives or because they come as seasonal workers, hoping to earn money as quickly as possible.

The DignityFIRM project has analysed the working and living conditions of migrant agricultural workers in five localities in Italy, Morocco, Poland, Spain and the Netherlands (see Table 1, in Annex). Although their situations differ across cases and depend on individual circumstances, most migrant workers in agriculture have precarious legal statuses and tend to face employment insecurity due to undeclared work, temporary labour contracts and the use of intermediaries. Their income often depends on the availability of work and on having all

worked hours paid properly, while additional costs (e.g. fees charged by intermediaries or housing expenses) further reduce their limited earnings. Finally, many migrant workers face harsh labour conditions and often lack access to adequate and decent housing.

Drawing on our five local cases, this policy brief identifies the factors that help explain these working and living conditions and offers a set of policy recommendations at the EU, national, regional and local levels.

### Explaining labour conditions

Migrant workers' labour precariousness results from a combination of economic pressures, structural features of the sector, migrants' expectations and opportunities, and state policies both on paper and in practice.

#### Economic pressures:

Competition in international markets is perceived by many farmers as unfair. They

argue that production in non-EU countries is much cheaper and that farmers there are not required to comply with EU rules. As a representative of a small-farmers' organisation in Spain put it: *"When third countries with very low production costs enter the market, our negotiation becomes even more impossible. It distorts everything."* This growing competition is viewed not only as an effect of globalisation but also as a consequence of EU trade liberalisation, including partnership agreements with countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and now with Mercosur and India.

The argument often put forward by proponents of trade liberalisation, that it is essential for promoting development elsewhere, should be qualified: as our study on the Moroccan case shows,

green development policies may end up benefiting large international companies while failing to generate a substantial number of quality jobs for local workers. The reason is that, in Morocco too, native workers' expectations may not always align with actual working conditions, thus making the sector partially dependent on incoming migrant workers who have lower expectations and, therefore, are more vulnerable to labour exploitation.

The second complaint by employers concerns the so-called "retailing revolution", namely the expansion of supermarket chains which, thanks to their enormous buyer power, control distribution and shape the production, processing and consumption of food. In practice, this means supermarket chains

impose their own standards on producers, covering issues such as quantity, quality and price. In this context, many employers argue that production costs rise while product prices fall, pushing them to reduce labour costs: *"If prices aren't fair, working conditions aren't fair either"*, one farmer concluded.

In this situation, the EU Directive on unfair trading practices in the agricultural and food supply chain (2019/633), which aims to curb supermarket power, is often seen as insufficient. First, because it is not as binding as a regulation would be and is only partially implemented in national laws. Second, in case of non-compliance, redress is extremely difficult in practice, as supermarket chains operate transnationally and small farmers lack the capacity to pursue legal action beyond their national contexts.

Finally, there are multiple international and national food certifications, covering food safety but also social conditions, which farmers must comply with to sell their produce to certain retailers. However, these certifications are often considered as "greenwashing," a "fairy tale" to "clean up" the sector's image and "ease" consumers' consciences. A Spanish unionist noted: *"You can show a document with all the conditions, but the reality may be very different ... What matters is the price (not the certification). Certification is part of the system - you have to buy it"*. Many farmers do also complain about certifications, arguing that they are extremely rigorous and respond to the demands imposed by supermarket chains.

A representative of a Spanish farmers' union said: *"these certifications demand many things. They represent the double standards of supermarkets: on the one hand, they demand quality protocols. On the other, they impose unfair prices"*. A Dutch greenhouse farmer holding four different certifications was surprised a less well-organised neighbouring farm was similarly certified, undermining the time and effort he put into compliance and his trust in the certification systems more generally.

#### **Characteristics of the sector:**

Work in agriculture is often seasonal, difficult to predict in advance, fluctuates daily and is low-skilled in nature. Some products, such as oranges and apples, are characterised by strong seasonality, with employment spikes in the summer and autumn months. Moreover, peak harvest periods depend on external factors, such as weather conditions or fluctuations in fruit prices, which make them difficult to predict. Weather also determines the work to be done day by day. For instance, a rainy day may mean no work at all. While work in greenhouses is less dependent on the passing of the seasons, and the climate can be controlled, without innovations (for instance, to make the temperature acceptable) an overly hot day may mean no work at all, or work can result in long-term health risks. Finally, labour conditions are harsh and often involve repetitive tasks.

For all these reasons, national workers tend not to take up jobs in agriculture. In

the five cases studied (including Morocco), the availability of national workers has declined due to social reasons (children's schooling, rejection of strenuous tasks, greater value placed on leisure time); economic reasons (workers shifting to other sectors, especially industry and services where wages and conditions are better, or to closer locations); and institutional reasons (in the Spanish case, the availability of social benefits for those who are unemployed).

#### **Expectations and opportunities for migrant workers:**

Agriculture serves as a means of entering the labour market for recently arrived, legally precarious or seasonal migrant workers. Two reasons explain this. First, working in the fields requires no specific skills, educational or professional qualifications, or language proficiency. Second, if migrants have no alternative options, agriculture is a way to work, earn an income and, where possible, secure a job – something that in cases such as Italy or Spain is essential for obtaining (through regularisation) or renewing a residence permit. For circular migrant workers, even when wages are low, they may still be comparatively higher than in their countries of origin, making circular migration a strategy to cope with precarious conditions at home. In the Netherlands, EU mobile workers regularly come in to earn some extra income while performing other types of jobs back home.

For the same reasons, when migrant workers acquire more skills (including contextual knowledge), become proficient in the national language, obtain a more stable residence permit or, in the case of circular workers, gain alternative opportunities either in their countries of origin or in other sectors or destinations, they tend to leave the agricultural sector. A Spanish police officer summarised it as follows: *“Agriculture works as a gateway. For 40–60 euros a day, who would stay?”* A migrant worker in Italy expressed it similarly: *“I want to change jobs because the agricultural sector is seasonal, it’s short-term work, and I need to have a more stable job.”*

### Migration policies:

Irregularity compounds the subordinate nature of migrant labour. The cases of Morocco, Italy and Spain show that lacking a residence permit, or holding only a temporary one, limits workers’ options not only to find jobs in other economic sectors but also to negotiate their working conditions or claim their rights. Precariousness of legal stay therefore contributes to precariousness at work: workers end up accepting poor, unstable or harsh working conditions in exchange for an employer’s promise of a job offer (crucial for regularisation) or a continued contract (necessary for permit renewal). As systematically observed in all three cases, regularised workers or those with more secure legal statuses tend to leave the agricultural sector. But having a regular migration status is no guarantee of

a dignified job either. EU citizens working in the Netherlands, for instance, may also face many instances of underpayment or high housing costs.

### Labour policies:

Labour rights are limited both on paper and in practice. On paper, the clearest example is Poland, where most agricultural workers are employed under civil-law (e.g. “harvest help”) contracts rather than labour contracts. This means that workers are not fully insured, and there are neither maximum working hours nor recognition of the right to rest. Another factor that weakens formal protection is the temporary nature of contracts, which restricts access to welfare benefits, unemployment support or sick leave. In addition, most temporary contracts in agriculture do not specify in advance the total number of hours to be worked, as this depends on factors such as weather conditions or the amount of work required. This leaves workers unable to predict their earnings, effectively transferring all sectoral uncertainty onto them. In the Netherlands, for instance, agricultural contracts specify only a minimum number of hours, while temporary agencies require workers to be available six days a week.

In practice, migrant workers’ rights are further curtailed. Again, Poland offers the clearest example: because individual farmers are not legally considered employers, they fall outside the scope of labour inspectorate control. As a result,

when legal labour standards are not met, there is no accountability or possibility of redress. In the other cases studied, labour inspections are also limited. There is a clear mismatch between available resources (i.e. the number of inspectors) and the scale of the task (i.e. the number of companies in the sector). As one Spanish trade unionist put it: *“There are eight or nine inspectors for thousands of companies. The incapacity is absolute. And when inspectors arrive, always after prior notice, the workers are indoctrinated.”* Even in the Netherlands, where the inspectorate has greater capacity, enforcement is not always guaranteed, for example when working hours are not formally registered, when temporary contracts cover not so temporary jobs or when farmers are not the direct, formal employers.

This brings us to the last point: the presence of intermediaries between workers and employers – widespread in Poland, Italy and the Netherlands – blurs responsibility for labour conditions and safety. For instance, though farmers in the Netherlands can be held liable for unpaid wages, if temporary agencies fail to pay up, in practice litigation is time consuming and has uncertain outcomes. The presence of intermediaries also creates incentives for employers and temporary agencies to maximise profit by cutting labour costs at the workers’ expense. Irregularities by both formal and informal intermediaries are common, including failing to provide proper contracts, underreporting workdays, or placing migrant workers in situations of labour exploitation. In the

Italian case, most efforts to reduce abuses have focused on providing legal assistance and raising workers’ awareness of their rights, but such initiatives have so far relied on short-term, internationally funded projects rather than structural measures. In the Netherlands, the reliance on temporary agencies has been increasingly contested in public debate. New legislation distinguishing “good” from “bad” intermediaries is being implemented but it does not fundamentally challenge the system.

#### **Housing policies:**

Housing remains a major unresolved issue across all countries. In Poland, the Netherlands and Italy, employer-provided accommodation or public shelters are often inadequate, while in Spain and Morocco – where employers are not, by law, responsible for migrant workers’ housing – severe shortages and discrimination have led to widespread substandard housing or informal settlements. The state’s response to these insufficient housing conditions varies considerably across countries. In Poland, consistent with its liberal approach, housing conditions are treated as part of the private contract between employers and workers, meaning the state neither regulates nor monitors them.

In the Netherlands, private sector norms define minimum housing conditions, for instance the size of a room and the bare minimum facilities to be available in group accommodations. Moreover, recent labour

and housing reforms have sought to reduce workers' dependency on employers by separating employment from accommodation. However, again, the core issue remains unresolved, as providing migrant housing remains highly profitable and accommodation facilities continue to be governed by strict surveillance and short-term leases, even where the work (e.g. performed in greenhouses) is not short-term. Moreover, in the Dutch case, local government permits for housing migrant workers can trigger neighbourhood legal protest and long-term delays in making (decent) accommodation available.

In Italy, the Piedmont regional government coordinated a memorandum of understanding to promote regular agricultural employment and housing for seasonal workers. Its impact, however, has been limited by the fact that many municipalities were reluctant to open accommodation facilities due to fears of losing public support, and by project-based, short-term funding for both municipalities and employers. Finally, in Morocco and Spain, substandard housing has not been addressed substantially by the state. The clearest example is the presence of irregular settlements amid Spain's so-called "plastic sea", where local governments have focused on evictions rather than on creating real housing alternatives.

## Policy recommendations: towards a dignified life

Human dignity means that a person is being treated as a subject rather than an object. The fact that in the Netherlands foreign workers are called "hands" (or even worse, "small hands") illustrates this objectivation and, therefore, lack of human dignity. Not being recognised as a worker and a neighbour with full rights, and thus being treated as a subordinated and disposable labour force, is the consequence. As we have learned from our local case studies, this is not uncommon in European agriculture. For this reason, policy changes at the EU, national and regional or local levels are sorely and urgently needed.

### At the EU level:

**Understand that liberal trade policies must not jeopardise the survival of European (particularly small-scale) farmers.** The issue is not only economic, but also relates to food sovereignty and sustainability, especially in the current context of climate crisis. This calls for measures to strengthen local food production and local produce consumption. The trade agreements with both Mercosur and India include safeguard clauses to protect EU agriculture. However, these clauses should also include specific measures to protect small local producers.

**Reconsider the functioning of the EU Directive on unfair trading practices in the agricultural and food supply chain (2019/633) in three ways.** First, by better defining the terms and conditions, which are often vague and too open to

interpretation, and by providing clearer guidance on its implementation at the national level. Second, by developing a set of measures to prevent abuse, fostering production and consumption spaces that are less constrained by the conditions imposed by supermarket chains. Third, in cases of unfair trading practices, by facilitating redress, particularly when supermarket chains operate transnationally or in other EU countries, and for small producers who may have more limited capacity and resources.

**Ensure better labour and living conditions for seasonal workers.** The EU Directive on seasonal workers (Directive 2014/36/EU) is vague and too open to interpretation, meaning that more binding requirements, also regarding its implementation, should be imposed. In addition, protection should be expanded to other kinds of seasonal agricultural workers, such as beneficiaries of protection residing in the country or mobile EU citizens. Our three cases are paradigmatic as in none of them does the EU directive apply: in Italy, because most seasonal workers already live in the country, often with precarious or irregular statuses; in Poland, because they are mostly from Ukraine, thus enjoying visa-free entry and, since 2022, many are residing in the country as refugees; and in the Netherlands, because most seasonal workers are EU citizens from Central and Eastern European countries, again falling outside the scope of the seasonal workers directive.

**Engage and organise consumers in requiring fair labour and living conditions for agricultural workers.**

Consumers are often not informed of the social conditions regulated under various certifications, making it difficult to exercise consumer pressure against those marketing the food. Given these limitations, an EU-based system to inform consumers (digitally) of the social conditions of the food products they buy is key. So far, information on the social conditions of workers is not part of the Food Information to Consumers Regulation (Regulation 1169/2011).

**At the national level:**

**Guarantee more secure and long-term legal statuses in order to prevent legal precariousness from turning into labour precariousness.** Our research shows that irregular migrant workers constitute a particularly subordinated labour force. In this regard, regularisation mechanisms (whether permanent or extraordinary) may be the best alternative, both for migrant workers and for employers who rely on their labour. At the same time, as the cases of the Netherlands and Poland show, having a stable residence permit does not protect migrant workers from being exposed to labour exploitation. Thus, a secure legal status is a necessary condition, but not a guarantee.

**Enhance labour rights by reducing precarious employment, fixing in advance the number of hours to be worked and limiting the role of**

**intermediaries.** In Poland, reducing precarious employment requires ensuring that agricultural workers are covered by labour contracts. In all cases, more stable forms of employment are advisable, for instance by introducing some form of continuity in temporary contracts (as Spain has done with what is known as the “fixed-discontinuous” contract, which allows workers to retain the right to return when new job positions are offered at the beginning of the next season) or by sequencing different crops and employers. In addition, it is crucial that labour contracts specify in advance the total number of hours to be worked or, at the very least, that the minimum established in the contract is significantly higher than it is today; otherwise, the uncertainty inherent to the sector is fully transferred to workers. Finally, the role of intermediaries should be more limited and more strictly regulated, as they are a key source of exploitation and unfair labour conditions. This includes policies that curtail intermediaries’ capacity to profit from migrants’ labour and clarify much more explicitly who is responsible – the formal employer, such as the agency, or the farmer – when labour rights are not guaranteed.

**Ensure the strict enforcement of labour policies.** To achieve this, it is essential to scale up the number of labour inspectors to match the number of workplaces to be monitored. In short, a more active and visible labour inspectorate is needed: *not* to police migrant workers or employers, but to improve working conditions. To this end, labour inspectorates should have the

authority to support workers, irrespective of their migration status. To be a trustworthy partner of the workers, they should not collaborate with immigration services for migration control purposes. A firewall between labour inspections and migration control, as advocated by ILO Convention no. 81, is key. Better labour market enforcement is also key to reducing informal work and to ensuring that the hours reported and paid (including overtime) correspond to the hours actually worked. Inspections should first focus on large farms, as they employ a higher percentage of workers and therefore the impact would be greater.

#### **At the regional and local levels:**

**Consider workers’ need for housing.** Europe needs migrant workers, but it often does not have, or does not plan for, adequate housing to accommodate them. In the agricultural sector, this gap between labour demand and housing provision is even more evident, frequently resulting in widespread substandard living conditions. It is therefore urgent that administrations – especially regional and local authorities, which often hold key competences under housing or planning laws – together with employers and the private sector, **develop housing alternatives.** The nature of such housing may differ depending on whether workers are seasonal or permanent. In all cases, however, it is essential that housing costs are proportionate to workers’ wages, that housing does not become a source of



extreme profit, that legal standards are met, that residential segregation is avoided, and, particularly for seasonal workers, that surveillance or disciplinary regimes in semi-closed facilities are prevented.

**At all levels of government, we ask for a moral reflection.** Our research findings articulate a plea to restore decent work to agriculture and the

agriculture supply chain. We call on the EU, national, regional and local governments to start a debate and make a moral appeal to the agricultural sector, and even more so, to the food supply chain and supermarkets, as well as consumers, regarding awareness, respect and dignity for migrant workers who provide essential daily fresh fruits and vegetables.



## Annex: Table 1

Country and region	Main characteristics
 ITALY  Saluzzo, Cuneo Piedmont North West Italy	<p>Saluzzo is a major fruit-producing district (apples, peaches, nectarines, kiwis and expanding berry crops) with highly seasonal labour peaks. Migrant workers make up over 64% of new agricultural contracts in the region, coming from a wide range of countries. Most are hired on short-term, low-skilled, seasonal contracts, which underpin the area's dependence on migrant labour.</p>
 MOROCCO  Chtouka Ait Baha Souss-Massa Centre-South Morocco	<p>Morocco's leading fruit- and citrus-producing area, it exports 74% of the country's citrus output. Many farms and packing houses are becoming increasingly dependent on sub-Saharan migrant workers, particularly during peak production periods. Most migrants work under seasonal, low-skilled arrangements, and the area has become a key hub for local-level migration management, including a reception and orientation office for migrants.</p>
 POLAND  Mazowieckie Centre-East Poland	<p>Poland's largest agricultural region, it grows diverse crops such as lettuce, strawberries, cherries and apples, employing the same workers across activities. In 2023, it accounted for 51% of all seasonal work permits and 29% of agricultural work notifications, with the workforce made up primarily of Ukrainian seasonal migrants. Most are hired on short-term, seasonal contracts from April to November.</p>
 SPAIN  Almeria Andalusia South Spain	<p>With more than 30,000 hectares of greenhouses, Almería produces multiple overlapping crops (tomatoes, peppers, courgettes, watermelons) allowing for a near year-round campaign. Migrant workers make up 68% of the agricultural workforce, mainly from Morocco but also Romania, Mali, Senegal, Ecuador and others. Most work under low-skilled, seasonal contracts, and thousands live in irregular settlements with extremely poor housing conditions.</p>
 THE NETHERLANDS  Venlo and Horst aan de Maas North Limburg South Netherlands	<p>One of the world's leading agricultural exporters, this region relies heavily on migrant labour, with registered migrant workers rising from 16% in 2015 to 33% in 2024. Production is highly technology-driven. Most foreign workers are EU mobile citizens staying for short or longer periods. Most migrants work under short-term, temp-agency contracts that fill both seasonal and structural labour shortages.</p>



## Deliverable information

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# Dignity for migrant workers in agriculture

### 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.

[www.dignityfirm.eu](http://www.dignityfirm.eu)



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