

Shades of Precariousness: **Migrants' Labour Conditions in an Italian Fruit District**

Working Paper WP5 – Italy Country Report on Agriculture

Authors:

Pietro Cingolani, Sara Korbi

FIERI – Forum Internazionale Ed Europeo Ricerche Sull'Immigrazione



Authors

Pietro Cingolani (PhD, University of Turin, 2008) is an Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Bologna and has been collaborating with FIERI since 2003. He has taught at the Universities of Turin, Trento, and Eastern Piedmont, and has worked with Italian and international academic institutions. He has extensive fieldwork experience not only in Italy but also in Romania and other Eastern European countries. His main research interests and areas of expertise include displacement and forced migration, transnationalism, urban ethnography, interethnic relations, and the relationship between mobility and social segregation. He has coordinated several research projects and, since 2006, has curated photographic exhibitions on these topics as well as the international documentary film festival Crocevia di Sguardi.

Sara Korbi holds a BA in International and Diplomacy Studies at the University of Trieste and a MA in International Relations at the University of Torino, where she specialized in Migration Studies. During her academic path, she gained experience in the field of International Protection and International Humanitarian Law: she worked as an intern at the Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection in Gorizia and spent several periods abroad while interning at the Permanent Mission of Italy to the UN in Geneva, particularly in the Humanitarian and Health Divisions and at the Legal Unit of the UNHCR EU Representation in Brussels. Furthermore, she also gained professional experience in the field, working as a Legal Assistant in a Reception centre for asylum seekers managed by the Italian Red Cross.

Executive Summary

This country report examines how the strategies and interactions of key local actors shape irregular migrant work and labour conditions in the Farm-to-Fork sector, focusing on the Saluzzo fruit district (Piedmont region), Italy. The main research question asks how employers, migrant workers, state institutions, and non-state actors (trade unions, NGOs, third-sector organisations) act and interact within a “local battleground” to produce specific outcomes in migrant workers’ working and living conditions. The study draws on qualitative fieldwork in Saluzzo, including interviews with a wide set of stakeholders (public administrations, labour inspectorate, employment services, employers and employers’ associations, unions, NGOs and volunteers) and with migrant workers of different nationalities and legal statuses, complemented by documentary and contextual sources on the district’s agricultural economy and labour governance.

Findings show that labour conditions remain structurally precarious due to interlocking pressures: squeezed margins and uncertainty driven by large-scale distribution and

climate-related instability; bureaucratic constraints in migration governance (notably the slow and restrictive flows-decree system); and persistent housing shortages and discrimination. These factors incentivise employers' demand for a highly flexible, low-cost workforce and push migrants—especially asylum seekers and undocumented workers—to accept irregular contracts (including “grey work”), low wages, unsafe conditions, and overcrowded or informal housing. Actor strategies are justified through three recurring frames—legal, possibility, and interest—whose clashes generate fragmented governance. While initiatives such as Good Land and Common Ground improved coordination, outreach, and rights awareness, their project-based, short-term nature limits sustainability. Overall, the report concludes that local interventions are necessary but insufficient without structural national reforms on labour intermediation, residence-permit pathways, enforcement capacity, and housing provision.

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Introduction

The DignityFIRM project is driven by the ambition to deepen the understanding of and to improve the policies related to irregular migrant work (IMW) in the Farm to Fork (F2F) sector, considering both its economic pivotal role and the EU's commitment to protecting the dignity of all individuals, regardless of their legal and employment status.

In this framework, **we aim to explain migrant workers' labour conditions in a specific locality and sector by focusing on the actions and interactions of the main actors involved.** With this purpose we adopt the **concept of local battleground** (Ambrosini 2021), which assumes that the local level is a contentious field in which different actors interact, cooperating or conflicting, including different levels of public responsibility as well as non-state actors. In this case, the concept of battleground includes the main actors (employers, migrant workers, trade unions, NGOs, national, regional and local administrations), their strategies (what actions they undertake with regard to the labour conditions of migrant workers), their frames (how they justify their choices) and the interaction among them resulting in a particular outcome in terms of migrant workers' labour conditions.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the actions/strategies of the main actors involved and the interaction among them shape migrant workers' labour conditions in **Italy, in the local case of Saluzzo** (Piedmont region).

1. Description of the local case

1.1 The Saluzzo fruit district: context and relevance

The Saluzzo fruit district is located in the province of Cuneo (Piedmont, Italy). It spans approximately 15,000 hectares and is the third most significant agricultural area in the country for fruit production. This territory is particularly relevant due to its reliance on seasonal migrant workers, who are attracted by employment opportunities in the agricultural sector. As a matter of fact, Cuneo ranks as the fifth largest Italian province in terms of the number of foreign workers employed in agriculture (Centro studi e ricerche IDOS 2018).

As of 2024, Saluzzo has a resident population of 17,525 people, of whom 2,326 are foreign nationals (from both EU and non-EU countries), representing approximately 13.3% of the total population. The main nationalities among the foreign residents include Albania, Romania, Morocco, China, Mali, India, Peru, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Gambia (ISTAT 2024).

As regards new employment contracts in agriculture in the Piedmont region, foreign citizens account for the majority, representing 64.2% of the total. Among them, Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers have seen significant growth over the past two years, especially compared to 2019, following Indian, Albanian, Moroccan, and Malian nationals. Most foreign workers are employed on fixed-term contracts, often seasonal and low-skilled, such as agricultural workers and harvesters, particularly in fruit picking and grape harvesting (Terra 2025).

The harvest season spans approximately six months, beginning in May with small fruits and concluding in mid-November with kiwis, while the introduction of new apple varieties has extended harvesting into early winter (ITA_WP5_EXP_14). These shifts in production are closely linked to broader transformations within the agricultural sector (Nori & Farinella, 2020). In response to market pressures, the number of farms has decreased while their average size has grown, leading to increased reliance on a flexible workforce (Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2023). Moreover, a lack of cooperation among farmers weakens their bargaining position with large-scale retailers, forcing them to accept disadvantageous sales prices. As a matter of fact, power in the supply chain is concentrated in the hands of supermarkets, which capture a large share of the final price (Mangano, 2020).

Climate change has further exacerbated challenges in the Saluzzo fruit district. Farmers are forced to adopt costly countermeasures, such as anti-hail nets, new chemical treatments, or more resilient hybrid varieties. These climatic uncertainties, combined with shifting production trends, have reshaped labour demand: farms now require a large workforce for very short periods, leading to increased reliance on low-cost, highly flexible migrant labour. This transformation has profoundly altered the composition of the agricultural workforce, making seasonal employment even more precarious and reinforcing patterns of informal and irregular work.

1.2 Migrant workers in the Saluzzo area

It is well known that the agricultural sector provides crucial employment opportunities for migrants at different stages of their journey, whether upon arrival in Italy, during transitional employment phases, or in situations of unemployment (Sempredon et al., 2017). This is largely because agricultural work has low entry barriers - it often requires minimal formal qualifications, prior experience, or knowledge of the Italian language. As a result, it becomes one of the few accessible job opportunities for newly arrived migrants and those facing legal or economic instability. As noted by Dines and Rigo (2015), the agricultural sector increasingly relies on foreign workers with precarious legal statuses, such as asylum seekers and holders of short-term residence permits. This phenomenon, often termed the 'refugeeization of the workforce', makes these workers particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Guidi & Berti, 2023).

Over the years, the Saluzzo fruit district has attracted a diverse migrant workforce. Since the 1990s, workers from Eastern Europe, particularly northern Albania, have migrated to the area, initially working in agriculture before transitioning to other sectors like construction. While some settled permanently, others arrived seasonally through Italy's Flow Decrees, gradually obtaining work permits (Buttino, 2022).

The 2008 economic crisis led many sub-Saharan African workers, who had lost industrial jobs, to turn to agriculture, a trend that intensified with the North African emergency of 2011-2012 (Ippolito et al., 2020). As a matter of fact, the North African emergency, triggered by the Arab Spring uprisings, led to an increase in the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers from countries such as Tunisia and Libya. During this period, the Italian government issued a significant number of temporary humanitarian permits, allowing many newly arrived migrants (particularly from sub-Saharan Africa) to legally reside in Italy and seek employment, often finding work in agriculture.

Since 2015, young men from West Africa (Mali, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Gambia) have become a significant presence in the fruit district. Often with low levels of formal education, they typically arrive in May for the fruit harvest and move to Southern Italy at the season's end. Many hold asylum permits or other forms of temporary protection. More recently, asylum seekers from Pakistan and Bangladesh, hosted in Piedmont's reception centres, have also joined the agricultural workforce, facing similar precarity (ITA_WP5_EXP_2).

1.3 Key actors and initiatives

The governance of seasonal agricultural labour in the Saluzzo fruit district involves a wide range of institutional and non-state actors, each playing a distinct role in shaping policies and interventions for migrant workers. At the institutional level, key actors include the Piedmont Region, which has promoted protocols for managing seasonal labour; the Prefecture of Cuneo, acting as a coordinating body among the various institutions and organizations involved; the Municipality of Saluzzo and other local administrations, which implement public accommodation solutions for seasonal workers; the Employment Centre of Saluzzo, facilitating labour market intermediation; and the Labour Inspectorate and Prosecutor's Office of Cuneo, tasked with monitoring and addressing irregularities.

Non-state actors also play a crucial role. Trade unions advocate for workers' rights, while employers' associations bring together agricultural sector employers. Additionally, a network of third-sector organizations, including Caritas, Consorzio Monviso Solidale, Cooperativa Armonia, provides essential housing and social support to migrant workers.

In recent years, several policies and projects have been implemented in Saluzzo to improve the working and living conditions of seasonal agricultural workers. The Piedmont Region has been particularly active in combating labour exploitation, especially in tackling the gangmaster system. Following the approval of the national law against gang mastering in 2016¹, the Piedmont Region introduced Law No. 12/2016², to assist farmers in renovating accommodations for seasonal workers. Moreover, in 2019, the Piedmont Region signed the "Protocol for the promotion of regular work in agriculture"³ alongside all regional Prefectures, several non-profit organizations, the regional branches of the Direction for Labour Policies, INPS, INAIL, and the National Association of Italian Municipalities. However, due to the absence of dedicated funding, the following year the region launched "Good Land"⁴, an

¹ Italian Law No. 199/2016 targets illegal labour practices and worker exploitation in agriculture, particularly the phenomenon of *caporalato* (gang mastering system). For further information, see <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2016/11/3/16G00213/sg>

² Regional Law No. 12/2016 (Piedmont) establishes provisions for the temporary accommodation of seasonal agricultural workers on farms in Piedmont. For further information, see <http://arianna.consiglioregionale.piemonte.it/base/coord/c2016012.html>

³ The Protocol for the promotion of regular work in agriculture is an agreement signed in March 2019 by the Piedmont Region to combat labour exploitation and illegal practices in the agricultural sector. It aims to ensure dignified living conditions for seasonal agricultural workers and foster their integration with local communities. The partners include the Piedmont Region, local Prefectures, Provinces, Municipalities, employers' associations, and trade unions. Special attention was given to the Saluzzo area, in the province of Cuneo, where a high concentration of foreign workers is present during the fruit harvest season. For further information:

https://www.regione.piemonte.it/governo/bollettino/abbonati/2019/10/attach/dgr_08502_1050_01032019.pdf

⁴ The Good Land ("*Buona Terra*") Project is an initiative by the Piedmont Region, funded by the Ministry of Labour through AMIF resources, launched in 2020 and concluded in September 2022. The project aimed to improve the living and working conditions of seasonal agricultural workers involved in fruit harvesting,

AMIF-funded project designed to compensate for this financial shortfall. The project aimed to inform and accommodate migrant seasonal workers, facilitate their access to local services, support labour market integration, combat irregular employment, and promote socially responsible agricultural practices among employers. Despite these efforts, the Protocol was not renewed after the centre-right regional government took office in 2019. As a result, a smaller-scale agreement⁵ was later signed between the Prefecture of Cuneo, the Municipality of Saluzzo, and other municipalities in the province.

Building on the success of “Good Land,” the region coordinated the “Common Ground⁶” project in 2022, in collaboration with four other Italian regions. This initiative aligns with the National Plan to combat labour exploitation in agriculture and gang mastering⁷, expanding its focus beyond agriculture to include logistics, construction, shipbuilding, tourism, and hospitality. The project, which ran until 2025, targeted migrants who were victims or at risk of labour exploitation. Its interventions extended beyond Saluzzo to other agricultural hubs in Cuneo province and three additional areas in Piedmont.

These policies and projects illustrate the evolving strategies to regulate seasonal labour in Saluzzo, addressing both the challenges of informal employment and the precarious conditions faced by migrant workers. However, the fragmentation of funding and shifting political priorities continue to shape the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives.

through experimental actions in the Saluzzo area. Project partners included: IRES Piemonte, the Municipality of Saluzzo in collaboration with Cooperativa Armonia, Agenzia Piemonte Lavoro, CGIL Piemonte, Concooperative Piemonte, Consorzio Monviso Solidale, Federazione Regionale Coldiretti Piemonte, and the Calabria Region. See: <https://piemonteimmigrazione.it/progetti/altri-progetti/itemlist/tag/buonaTerra>

⁵ In 2020, the Prefecture of Cuneo signed a Protocol to establish widespread accommodation facilities and address health needs related to COVID-19. It involved collaboration among local authorities, employers' associations, and trade unions to ensure dignified living conditions and promote the regularization of employment for seasonal workers. See: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/notizie/Documents/Prefettura-Cuneo-Protocollo-accordo-Saluzzo.pdf>

⁶ The Common Ground project is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) under the National Operational Program (PON) "Inclusion" 2014–2020 and the National Program (PN) "Inclusion and Fight Against Poverty" 2021–2027, managed by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. The project runs from March 2023 to June 2025 and aims to prevent and combat irregular work, undeclared employment, and labour exploitation, across various sectors. The initiative operates in the regions of Piedmont, Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, Liguria, and Veneto, involving a partnership of public and private entities coordinated by each region.

⁷ The Three-Year Plan for combating labour exploitation and illegal work (2020–2022) is a national strategy aimed at preventing and combating labour exploitation and illegal work practices in the agricultural sector. Approved by the National Coordination Table on February 20, 2020, it was developed through collaboration between institutions, labour representatives, employers' associations, and non-governmental organizations. The Plan was extended until September 3, 2025, as formalised by the Interministerial Decree of June 17, 2022. See: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/priorita/Documents/Piano-Triennale-contrasto-a-sfruttamento-lavorativo-in-agricoltura-e-al-caporalato-2020-2022.pdf>

2. Migrant workers' labour conditions

Legal Status

In this area, there is a part of immigrant workers who hold a work permit, which is renewable every one or two years, or a long-term residence permit. The latter is granted to migrants who have resided in Italy continuously for at least five years with a valid residence permit.

Many regular workers are also employed through seasonal work permits issued under Italy's immigration quota system ("flows decree"), which allows for temporary residence and employment for a specific period. The system is slow and exposes workers to fraud (Ero Straniero, 2024). Many interviewees emphasized that while the flows system could be an effective way to manage seasonal work, it is ineffective for several reasons: the number of workers admitted is always lower than needed; permits are issued too late relative to agricultural work cycles; and administrative costs for employers are high (ITA_WP5_EXP_11). Some migrants who entered through the flow decrees secured agricultural jobs but, once their contracts ended, were unable to convert their residence permits and became undocumented.

A second group of workers consists of immigrants holding asylum seeker permits. Asylum seekers can work in Italy after a two-month waiting period from their application date. Their permit is valid for six months and is renewable while awaiting a decision. Additionally, beneficiaries of international protection have the right to work under the same conditions as Italian citizens.

Undocumented workers constitute a portion of the agricultural labour force for various reasons. Some failed to renew their permits before they expired and lost their legal status, others lost their jobs and could not meet the renewal criteria within the grace period, and some asylum seekers received negative responses. There are also workers who are unable to convert a residence permit for special protection (formerly humanitarian permit) into a work permit. These migrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to their lack of legal protection.

Employment Insecurity

The contractual conditions of migrant workers in agriculture in this area are characterized by a mix of formal and informal employment arrangements, reflecting broader trends in the sector and specific dynamics of migrant labour. There are various forms of recruitment:

1. **Direct Employment by farmers:** Some migrant workers are directly employed by farm owners. These contracts are often seasonal and short-term, aligned with the agricultural calendar.
2. **Employment through temporary agencies:** Larger farms often rely on temporary employment agencies. However, misuse of these agencies has led to precarious employment conditions.
3. **Recruitment through cooperatives or brokerage firms:** The number of these cooperatives has increased in the Saluzzo area in recent years. While they can quickly respond to seasonal labour demands, irregularities are common, such as failing to provide proper contracts, underreporting workdays, and engaging in illegal labour intermediation.
4. **Illegal intermediaries:** Some workers are recruited informally through illegal intermediaries known as *caporali*. These intermediaries organize transportation, housing, and payments, often under exploitative conditions. In 2023, Piedmont recorded 43 verified cases of *caporalato*, making it the second most affected region in northern Italy after Veneto (INL, Vigilance Results 2023).

The first *caporalato* trial in northern Italy, known as the "Momo" trial, took place in the province of Cuneo. The case was named after Moumouni Tassebedo, known as "Momo," a Burkinabé immigrant who organized fellow countrymen as agricultural workers in Saluzzo.

Income Inadequacy

Wages vary but typically range from €5 to €6 per hour. Under regular contracts, gross wages are €7.5 per hour, which translates to €6.5 net, while employers incur a cost of €11 per hour. In irregular situations, wages can drop as low as €4 per hour. A worker can earn approximately €1,000 per month with 20 working days. This low income must also cover expenses such as housing, making it difficult for migrant workers to sustain themselves (ITA_WP5_EXP_8).

Working conditions

Agricultural work involves physically demanding labour under harsh conditions, and repetitive tasks like fruit picking. These conditions have led to physical strain and health problems among workers in this area. Agricultural workers are often exposed to hazardous environments, including heavy machinery, pesticides, and extreme weather conditions, without adequate protective equipment or safety measures.

Women working in fruit sorting and warehouses face particularly harsh conditions. The composition of the workforce in fruit sorting and warehouses is highly diverse, with Chinese,

African, Albanian and Romanian women. Their work involves standing for long hours in a freezing environment, and some women interviewed declared that they faced mistreatment and also workplace discrimination by supervisors. Some female workers report being controlled and reprimanded by their supervisors, who were often of a different nationality and enjoyed preferential treatment from employers.

Housing and Living Conditions

Migrant workers are often provided with substandard, overcrowded housing that lacks basic amenities. For workers arriving under seasonal flow decrees, the law requires employers to provide housing. However, this is not always the case, and many migrant workers arriving through the flow system have had to find housing on their own.

Asylum seekers have the right to live in reception facilities, but these are often located far from agricultural fields. Despite the distance, many workers continue to live in these facilities and commute daily. However, asylum seekers who do not return to the facilities in the evening risk losing their right to stay.

Housing remains a central and unresolved issue. Employer-provided accommodation is often inadequate, and finding rental housing in the area is difficult for many migrants. Public reception facilities designed to house seasonal workers cannot meet the high demand, leading some workers to live in informal settlements, camping in public areas of the city.

3. Actors' strategies and frames

3.1 Employers' strategies and frames

3.1.1 Strategies

Recruitment Strategies

Employers state that their biggest challenges are timely securing workers during peak harvest periods and forecasting labour needs in advance due to external factors beyond their control, such as weather conditions and fruit price fluctuations.

Many employers, particularly those in medium-sized companies, choose to diversify their workforce. Seasonal workers, who stay for a shorter period and are less visible, can often be employed without formal contracts.

Few employers use the flow decrees, as they believe the system does not work effectively. Some avoid it because they cannot properly assess the workers arriving through this mechanism and are then obligated to keep inefficient workers until the end of the contract

(ITA_WP5_EXP_6). Others refrain from using flow decrees due to procedural inefficiencies, which cause workers to arrive too late to meet the companies' needs.

One of the most common recruitment strategies is relying on informal intermediaries and networks of fellow countrymen. Employers cite two main reasons for this approach: a trusted worker can vouch for a new hire, and if they share a common language, the first worker can help translate instructions:

"The simplest approach is to ask workers who have performed well in previous years to recommend others. That way, I can be sure the new workers will also be reliable. It is very much based on trust. It's also easier because the worker can translate for compatriots who do not speak Italian." (ITA_WP5_EXP_12)

Many employers deliberately avoid hiring workers who have connections with labour unions. A trade unionist reported that farmers maintain a WhatsApp group where they share information about workers who have filed union complaints, ensuring these workers are not hired elsewhere (ITA_WP5_EXP_2).

Several farmers outsource labour supply to external companies. These entities, known as "Landless Cooperatives," operate without owning or directly managing land. In some cases, they are sole proprietorships run by immigrants who manage worker recruitment, training, safety equipment, and even transportation. These companies often provide accommodation as well

Some producer organizations consider these cooperatives as a form of legalized gangmastering because they function similarly to illegal labour brokers — recruiting, training, and transporting workers while charging them fees for these services (ITA_WP5_EXP_14).

According to Article 29 of the Decree Law 276/2003, the contracting agricultural company is jointly liable with the subcontractor for workers' wage and social security contributions claims, within a time limit of two years from the termination of the contract. The agricultural company has to verify the compliance of the subcontractor with social security obligations and it may face penalties for violations of labour and safety regulations. Many employers are unaware of this joint liability and, for this reason, do not bother to carry out all the necessary checks.

Few employers recruit workers through online platforms. Both public and private platforms have proven ineffective since they do not allow employers to rely on trust-based hiring mechanisms (Korbi, 2024). Public employment centres are also underutilized, as they fail to provide seasonal workers with the speed required and do not allow employers to select workers directly (ITA_WP5_EXP_14).

Labour Management Strategies

Labour practices differ significantly between small and large companies. Irregular employment is more common in small businesses, whereas large firms have adopted mechanization to reduce their reliance on seasonal migrant labour.

Some employers seek guidance from producer organizations to ensure compliance with labour laws:

"Our association warns us about suspicious situations, such as cooperatives offering labour at unrealistically low prices. They advise us to reject such offers and report them to authorities." (ITA_WP5_EXP_11)

Employers also adopt different strategies for worker accommodation. Some ignore housing issues, relying on the help provided to workers by charities like Caritas or by non-governmental organisations. Others participate in public accommodation programs, paying for cooperative-managed accommodations, or require workers to find their own housing. Some employers house workers on-site.

Strategies with large-scale distribution

Employers agree that their biggest challenge is dealing with large-scale retailers, which impose strict pricing rules and operational requirements:

"Retail chains control everything. They set the purchase price, reject fruit without paying, and don't tell us how much they need until midweek, after we've already delivered the produce." (ITA_WP5_EXP_5)

Another challenge is that each retailer demands its own certification. Farmers argue that a unified national certification would be more efficient. Small producers struggle to meet multiple certification requirements, prompting many to join Producer Organizations for better bargaining power (ITA_WP5_EXP_11). Despite these strategies, farmers remain at a significant disadvantage compared to large-scale distributors, and no satisfactory solutions have yet been found for them.

3.1.2 Frames

Employers justify their strategies within specific frames. Some use an **interest frame**, arguing that undeclared labour helps them save on social contributions. Some claim that also immigrant workers prefer cash payments over lower wages with social security deductions. Employers favour African immigrants for their perceived strength and endurance (ITA_WP5_EXP_6).

According to employers, these qualities are lacking among young Italians. In the past, Italians comprised the majority of seasonal workers, but today they are unwilling to take on such jobs. Employers also hire asylum seekers living in reception facilities, as this aligns with their economic interests by reducing the costs associated with worker accommodation.

A **possibility frame** emerges when employers justify choices based on available options. For instance, while cooperatives may cost more per hour than direct hires (€13 vs. €12),

they provide additional services such as worker training, provision of protective equipment, and linguistic mediation in the workplace (ITA_WP5_EXP_5). In some cases, farmers face simultaneous fruit harvesting activities in different fields. Cooperatives manage this by relocating workers as needed. The use of cooperatives is described as the only way to ensure an immediate and flexible workforce. In some cases, employers argue also that not declared work is the only way to remain financially viable due to high labour taxes.

Lastly, a **legal frame** is used to explain compliance-driven choices. Some employers fear inspections and claim increased enforcement has led to the criminalization of their actions. Following the 2024 "Latina effect," triggered by the death of an Indian worker,⁸ employers claim they now face extraordinary scrutiny. Indian worker Satnam Singh died after a severe workplace accident and was abandoned by his employers in critical condition. Farmers argue that because of Singh's employer's criminal actions, they are now all stigmatized (ITA_WP5_EXP_14).

According to unions, some employers in the Saluzzo area are also increasingly reluctant to hire African immigrants because these workers have become more aware of their rights and no longer accept the conditions imposed in the past.

Employers argue that high production costs for them stem from environmental and regulatory constraints:

"The law forbids us from using many chemical products, forcing us to replace them with very expensive natural products. In the past we used Dursban, an insecticide still permitted in many European countries. In Italy, it is now banned, which significantly raises costs. To support farmers, an exemption from this rule should be introduced " (ITA_WP5_EXP_10).

3.2 Migrant workers' strategies and frames

3.2.1 Strategies

Recruitment strategies

Many migrant workers highlight that informal recruitment is the most common way to find employment in agriculture. The easiest way for migrants to secure employment is by relying on social ties and on their community support. They often turn to compatriots that have already worked in the area and that can introduce them to employers and recommend them for the positions.

⁸ On this event see this article: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/article/2024/jul/20/satnam-lost-his-arm-and-was-allegedly-left-to-die-on-the-roadside-this-is-the-horror-of-exploitation-on-italian-farms#:~:text=Kaur%20described%20a%20scene%20she,%2DCqil%2C%20told%20the%20Observer>

In some cases, migrant workers return to the same employer as the previous years, since they have already established familiarity and a trustful relationship. However, sometimes, migrant workers go with their bicycles from farm to farm, asking employers directly for work. This is particularly common outside peak season, when finding a job is more challenging. During our fieldwork in Saluzzo in mid-July, we observed this firsthand. At that time, the small fruit harvest had already ended, but the peach harvest had yet to begin. As a result, many migrants were unemployed, searching for work by cycling from one farm to another and introducing themselves to farmers.

Some migrants also declared that they relied on informal intermediaries to find employment. This is particularly common among newly arrived asylum seekers, who are unfamiliar with how the labour market works in Italy and unaware of their rights. Many of them place their trust in members of their national community, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Informal intermediaries are often migrants themselves and can easily integrate into communities of newly arrived asylum seekers, gaining their trust. As a result, asylum seekers frequently rely on them and risk becoming trapped in exploitative work conditions. Interviews suggest that this pathway is particularly dangerous, as it often leads to underpayment and work without a contract.

“Every morning, the Pakistani boss would come to the reception community, pick us up in a van, and take us to the fields. I worked nine hours a day and was paid five euros per hour. My boss paid me in cash; he never transferred money to my bank account to avoid being traced. He also made me sign a paper. I thought it was a contract, but then a friend saw it and told me it wasn’t a contract at all”. (ITA_WP5_IM_13)

Some migrants relied also on the public employment office or temporary work agencies, but only as a last resort, when they could not find work through informal connections and, particularly, outside the peak harvesting season, when some migrants found themselves unemployed. In practice, however, they often find this system to be ineffective.

Contractual and payment strategies

In general, work contracts in agriculture are mostly seasonal, with some of them being very short, lasting only a few weeks during the peak season. Migrant workers that were interviewed pointed out several critical issues concerning the work contracts. Indeed, almost all declared that they had accepted irregular contractual conditions, such as being officially employed for fewer days than worked (grey work). In some cases, this happened because migrant workers were not conscious of their rights, on other occasions, they didn’t have any alternative.

“As soon as I arrived at the workplace, on the first day, the boss told me: ‘I’ll put 15 days on your payslip, but you’ll work 30.’ I immediately accepted. I thought it didn’t make much difference to me because I was getting paid anyway, and that was the

rule, if they told everyone the same thing right away. I believe this system keeps going without problems because if they check, the contract is there, and the inspectors don't look inside the payslips". (ITA_WP5_IM_15)

On certain occasions, migrants declared to have worked without a contract at all. This happened particularly when they were employed for very short periods, such as less than 2-3 weeks. Some migrants highlight that accepting this condition is very common among workers coming from the South of Italy, where they are used to working without a contract and are not aware of other possibilities.

Some African migrants that have been working in the Saluzzo district for a long time, highlighted how things have changed over the years. They commonly used to find employment through informal intermediaries, often other migrants, who acted as middlemen between employers and workers, in exchange for a fee. Migrants would either pay the middlemen directly or have part of their salary withheld. Interviewed migrants noted that this practice has become less common, particularly because African workers have become more aware of their rights. However, among newly arrived Pakistani and Bangladeshi asylum seekers, this is still present.

Some migrants declared to have accepted low wages and delayed or incomplete payment, as they were not able to negotiate better conditions, due to the fear of retaliation and of being fired by the employer.

Housing and welfare strategies

Housing remains a challenge for most migrants, who often struggle to access the rental market due to financial instability and discrimination. As a survival strategy, some of them declare to rely on their communities for support, sharing accommodations with people of the same nationality.

"A major problem is housing. I had a job, but no place to live, it was extremely difficult to find one. How did I solve it? We Burkinabè helped each other. When one of us found a place, they took others in as well. Whenever other companions struggled to find housing, I let them stay there without any problem. However, in my opinion, it should be public institutions solving this issue, not leaving us alone". (ITA_WP5_IM_1)

In other cases, migrant workers can access temporary housing solutions provided by public institutions, such as container accommodations, or are housed by their employers, often inside the agricultural company. However, as mentioned earlier, some migrants, especially those who are still unemployed, are forced to live in informal settlements such as in Saluzzo's park, while waiting for a place in the containers provided by public institutions. Those migrants also depend on welfare organisations for food and basic needs.

Training and career transition strategies

Many migrants consider agricultural work as a temporary solution while they seek opportunities for more stable employment through training and career transition strategies. They chose agricultural work because it has low entry barriers but declare that they wish to transition to more stable sectors, such as construction or manufacturing. As a matter of fact, work in agriculture provides immediate income, needed to support themselves while they attend training courses, or useful to save money for professional certifications to improve job prospects. However, financial constraints often make it difficult to leave unstable jobs, as migrants struggle to afford training while also meeting their basic living expenses. This leads them being trapped in a precarious situation.

Moreover, many migrant workers find themselves "trapped into mobility". This is particularly the case of those farm workers forced to constantly move between the North and South of Italy, following the agricultural seasons. Because of being always on the move, they don't have the time or resources to settle, regularise their status, or find more stable employment. This condemns them to a life of instability and vulnerability, perpetuating a vicious cycle of exploitation.

Strategies of resistance and awareness of their rights

Some workers, particularly the ones with longer working experience in the agricultural sector, recognise the importance of protests to improve their living and working conditions. We were told that some migrants undertook collective actions for some issues, such as housing. However, this is possible only if all workers are aware of their position and are willing to take action as a group. In other cases, especially when newly arrived migrants started working, this caused competition among workers.

"The problem in agriculture right now is that there are many African brothers trying to take your job by lowering the hourly wage. For example, I'm employed by a company that pays me 7 Euros an hour, and African brothers go to my boss telling him 'take me instead of him, I'll ask you for 6.50 Euros an hour.' The problem with agricultural work is mainly ours, the African workers': out of fear, we don't report injustices because employers know each other and exchange information about us."
(ITA_WP5_IM_12)

Some workers emphasized that they have relied on unions to ensure their rights were guaranteed. The relationship with employees and unions has improved in recent years, due to many projects that have been implemented in the Saluzzo district.

3.2.2 Frames

Legal Frame

When interviewed, many migrant workers justified working under precarious conditions due to the limits imposed by their legal status. A high share of migrants are asylum seekers,

therefore, they hold a six-month permit of stay, which is renewable depending on their asylum procedure. This short duration is a major obstacle, as many employers are reluctant to hire asylum seekers whose permits may expire, fearing they could become irregular.

Even when migrants obtain a longer residence permit, such as the special protection permit or the work permit, they will have to renew it at some point. In the case of work permits, their validity is directly tied to the existence of a work contract. Without a contract, migrants can not renew their permit of stay and risk falling into irregularity. Therefore, this urgent need for a work contract, pushes migrants to resort to agricultural work and, particularly, accept precarious contractual conditions, such as working more hours than officially declared.

Those migrants holding a special protection permit, which lasts two years, need to convert it into a work permit before expiration. As a result, they too must secure a job contract to maintain legal status.

Interest Frame

On certain occasions, migrant workers reported that they willingly accepted working under those conditions, because they found it convenient or because they had some kinds of benefits. One key factor mentioned by workers was the ability to obtain agricultural unemployment benefits. In Italy, seasonal agricultural workers who reach at least 51 days of registered work within one year can apply for unemployment benefits, which provide financial support during periods without work. As a result, for many migrant workers, the priority is not necessarily securing stable employment but ensuring they meet the minimum required workdays.

“The boss will put fewer hours in the contract than I will actually work, but that’s fine with me because he pays me the rest off the books. It works for both of us; I just need to reach the required number of workdays to qualify for agricultural unemployment benefits”. (ITA_WP5_IM_12)

Another case is that of seasonal workers that spend part of the year in Italy working in agriculture and part in their country of origin. The short duration of their contract allows them to go back to their families every year after the work finishes. (ITA_WP5_IM_1)

Possibility Frame

Often, migrants make choices based on necessity rather than preference. Many workers accept precarious conditions because they have no other alternative. They are highly vulnerable due to their legal status, lack of knowledge of the Italian language and of labour rights, or they have the urgent need to start working immediately to support themselves and their families. As a result, they don’t have any power of negotiation and find themselves trapped in exploitative working and living conditions.

"I worked off the books because it was the only possibility I had at the time. I was an asylum seeker, and after trying with several farmers, no one wanted to hire me with that residence permit. That's why I accepted to work without a contract, I needed money, and at least this way, I could earn a little". (ITA_WP5_IM_2).

For some migrants who have lived in Italy for a long time, agriculture may be the only option, especially for those who have not gained other skills or are aging and find it difficult to secure different employment. This situation often traps them in their current roles, even if they are dealing with health issues or old age.

3.3 State actors' strategies and frames

3.3.1 Strategies

The Piedmont Region played a role in the implementation phases of the Law No. 199 of October 29, 2016, "Provisions on combating undeclared work, labour exploitation in agriculture, and wage realignment in the agricultural sector". The Region oversees transport services, vocational training, and manages the Regional Rural Development Programs, designed in line with the National Plan and funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Additionally, the Region collaborates with local authorities to plan and organize integrated social service delivery. The Region enacted a regional law to provide temporary accommodation for seasonal farmworkers, in 2019 signed the "Protocol for the Promotion of Regular Work in Agriculture, and it promoted the AMIF-funded "Good Land" project in 2020 and the "Common Ground" project in 2022.

The Region has also participated in local initiatives, including the Local Multi-Sectoral Plan to Combat Labour Exploitation in Saluzzo. It facilitated coordination among local authorities already engaged with migrant workers.

The "Good Land" and "Common Ground" projects were primarily managed by the Social Cohesion Department, responsible for social policies and immigration, without direct involvement from the Agriculture and Food Department. Consequently, regional efforts focused more on immigrant social and work integration than on agri-food supply chain regulations or agricultural policies. While the Region provided financial support to improve conditions for immigrant agricultural workers, a regional official we interviewed pointed out major limitations. Long-term interventions are necessary, but funded projects are short-lived and disconnected from structural policies, relying on temporary project-based funding that ceases when projects conclude.

Piedmont lacks a law enabling structural interventions for immigrant agricultural workers. The outdated Regional Law No. 64 of 1989, "Rules for the Reception and Integration of Non-EU Immigrants," has not had an active implementation plan for years.

Another key actor in supporting immigrant agricultural workers is the Municipality of Saluzzo. Despite the presence of precarious immigrant labourers since the early 2000s, the municipality's first significant initiatives began in 2018. That year, in partnership with a network of organizations—including social cooperatives and the social-welfare consortium—the municipality launched the "PAS project" to accommodate seasonal workers. In 2020, when the reception centre did not reopen due to COVID-19, the Municipality became a key signatory of the "Widespread Reception Protocol," securing approximately 40 places for seasonal workers in its facilities. Additionally, the Municipality participated in the "Good Land" and "Common Ground" projects and led the "Ubuntu Project" (2021–2022), which focused on improving migrant communication and information services while promoting public awareness of their working conditions.

One of the Municipality's most impactful initiatives is the "Multiprofessional Infopoint," where public and private organizations collaborate to assist immigrant workers with job orientation, accommodation support, and cultural and linguistic mediation.

The Municipality has also developed a "Local Multi-Sector Plan to Combat Labour Exploitation and Illegal Hiring," with initiatives planned from 2023 to 2026, including career guidance, training, professional retraining, labour intermediation, business engagement, housing interventions, and institutional communication improvements.

The municipality prioritizes seasonal migrant workers, particularly ultra-seasonal ones present only during the harvest period. It has dedicated fewer resources to improving conditions for regular immigrants and those with long-term contracts. As with the Region, the Municipality struggles with structural funding shortages.

Saluzzo has become a key hub for migrant workers across Italy and beyond due to its available services. However, this proactive stance has drawn criticism. Right-wing political parties accused the centre-left administration of attracting illegal immigrants, exacerbating rather than solving problems. Conversely, migrant rights organizations, such as the anti-racist movement, argue the municipality has done too little, fearing actions that might oppose employer interests.

The third actor we interviewed, the Saluzzo Public Employment Centre, operates regionally, assisting job seekers, unemployed individuals, and employers. It has expanded services for immigrant workers, hiring five specialists, including an African cultural mediator, as part of a national expansion plan in 2022. Public job matching for seasonal agricultural work remains challenging. Farmers rely on informal hiring, and the employment centre's procedures are slow compared to farmers' immediate staffing needs. Consequently, job intermediation services at the Infopoint were transferred to the Consortium of Social and Welfare Services. The public employment centre now prioritizes transitioning immigrants out of agriculture into other sectors, such as logistics, metalworking, and agri-food.

The Labour Inspectorate is another key actor. It intervenes when workers report violations or during national inspection campaigns. Through an agreement with the International Organization for Migration, inspectors collaborated with cultural mediators to inform migrants on their rights and labour exploitation risks. This intervention model is defined as multi-agency, and was implemented from 2020 to 2024 in the "Alt Caporalato" and "Alt Caporalato DUE" national projects.

However, with only 11 inspectors and four Carabinieri for the entire province, agricultural inspections are limited to peak harvest periods.

3.3.2 Frames

State actors justify their strategies based on different frameworks. Firstly, there is a **legal frame**. As we have seen, the Piedmont Region plays a significant role in implementing the provisions of the Law No. 199, particularly in the area of promotion and management of the Agricultural Labour Quality Network, the enhancement of employment services, the organization of transportation for agricultural workers, the monitoring and inspection activities and active labour policies and training.

Based on the Law No. 199, the Labour Inspectorate is responsible for sanctioning and reporting employers who exploit agricultural workers, conducting field inspections to verify working conditions, collaborating with law enforcement to dismantle illegal labour networks, monitoring the transportation of agricultural workers and participating in institutional working groups to develop anti-exploitation strategies.

Some use an **interest frame**. For the Region Piedmont the interest is to balance the needs of immigrant workers, employers, and local administrations. For this reason, it has coordinated projects in which it has brought these different parties together, trying to encourage collaboration, but has never supported repressive interventions against one of the parties.

The Municipality of Saluzzo prioritizes social security and public order, focusing on providing decent conditions while addressing public concerns about street homelessness. When municipal administrators were questioned on their priorities, they replied that a specific priority was to guarantee migrant workers decent conditions of hospitality and to meet the demands of residents, particularly on the issue of public decorum and coexistence.

"The presence of workers sleeping and living on the streets was not only a matter of human dignity but also a matter of decorum and public order. The municipality's initiatives did not happen only because of the existence of a law, but also because it had an interest in removing these people from the street, also so as not to fuel the hostility and anger of other citizens' (ITA_WP5_EXP_19_).

Other municipalities, however, refrain from interventions, arguing that seasonal migrants stay only briefly and public funds should serve residents' needs instead.

A **possibility frame** emerges when state actors justify choices based on available options. The Saluzzo municipality pointed out that it has limited instruments to change labour or migration laws, on which there would be substantial changes to be implemented. On this level, the only action the municipality can take is advocacy:

"An obligation should be established by law to use public tools for matching labour supply and demand, an obligation for companies to provide reception to all workers and not only those who arrive with the flow decrees, structural resources should be allocated to support migrant workers, and finally, the declaration of labour needs should be made compulsory for companies. All these aspects, for the time being, are not regulated by current laws. So, as a municipality, we participate at different tables, even at the tables of the Ministry of Labour, and it is there that we can highlight our case, make advocacy and push for a change in the laws. We are not able to do anything more" (ITA_WP5_EXP_19).

State actors acted according to what is possible given a particular set of external constraints. In some cases, these were linked with a shortage of personnel. Concerning the labour inspectorate, the workload has increased especially at peak times and for this reason the inspectorate is not able to check all companies, but has to make a selection, based on reports.

The employment office also faced serious problems with regard to resources. Initially, it could not provide adequate services for foreign workers. Later, with the hiring of a cultural mediator, this problem was partly solved, but the problem of dealing with small farmers remained, as they usually don't rely on the employment centre to find seasonal workers.

3.4 Non-state actors' strategies and frames

3.4.1 Strategies

In general, non-state actors are fundamental in providing essential assistance to seasonal migrant workers and, a majority of those that we interviewed, were partners in local projects, such as the AMIF "Good Land" project and the "Common Ground" project.

Trade unions

Trade unions play a crucial role in improving migrants' working conditions. Traditionally, the agricultural sector in Italy, and in the Saluzzo district as well, has been one of the least unionised areas of the labour market. Several factors contributed to this, including the seasonal and highly fragmented nature of agricultural work, the high turnover of workers, and the historical marginalisation of agriculture within the broader priorities of the trade

unions, which have often focused more on industrial and manufacturing sectors. Moreover, the sector has long been dominated by employers' associations that resisted union influence among farmworkers. Despite these challenges, the increasing presence of vulnerable and precariously employed migrant workers has led trade unions to adopt more proactive strategies. In the Saluzzo district, for instance, FLAI-CGIL has played a crucial role in promoting seasonal workers' rights through legal assistance, contract and payslip verification, cultural mediation, and preventive outreach. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to adapt union strategies to the evolving realities of labour exploitation in agriculture, particularly in relation to migrant workers.

FLAI-CGIL has been a partner in both the Good Land and Common Ground projects and, thanks to these initiatives, was able to build a network with local stakeholders and to expand its activities. For instance, through the Good Land project, FLAI-CGIL was able to hire cultural mediators, essential in engaging migrant workers, gaining their trust and disseminating information on labour rights. Thanks to the activities carried out by the cultural mediators, many workers have become more aware of the importance of recording their working hours, fundamental for the wage recovery disputes at the end of the season. However, even if funds have permitted the expansion of activities, trade unionists declare that cases of severe exploitation still persist. FLAI-CGIL has successfully engaged seasonal workers from sub-Saharan Africa, who have been the majority in recent years. However, they acknowledge that a portion of seasonal workers remains beyond their reach, particularly those housed directly on employers' farms and asylum seekers from Pakistan and Bangladesh, who are often accommodated within the reception system. One of FLAI-CGIL's key initiatives has been its involvement in the Multiprofessional Infopoint. CGIL has offered legal advice, cultural mediation, trade union assistance. However, trade unionists highlight the difficulties in engaging with the employers and their associations.

"We can't collaborate with employers' associations. There is a complete lack of initiative on their part. They never disclose their labour needs. When asked how many workers they require, they don't respond. In our view, admitting to a high demand for foreign labour could expose irregularities in employment contracts and reveal that the number of workdays officially declared by farms is insufficient to cover actual labour needs." (ITA_WP5_EXP_1)

Beyond FLAI-CGIL, the USB (Unione Sindacale di Base) union is also active in advocating for migrant workers' rights in the agricultural sector. USB has been involved in grassroots mobilization, organizing protests and strikes to demand better wages, dignified housing, and fair working conditions for seasonal workers.

Caritas

Caritas assists seasonal migrant workers employed in agriculture, providing low-threshold services to meet their basic needs. One of the most important initiatives is healthcare assistance, with medical and dental clinics available for those without health coverage.

Seasonal workers, since they move frequently, are often not registered in the Saluzzo registry and therefore do not have a general doctor. Additionally, Caritas organizes a mobile unit to distribute blankets and food to those living on the streets, particularly seasonal workers sleeping in public spaces. Other essential services include the provision of clothing, meals, and showers, as well as shelter for highly vulnerable individuals, such as migrants discharged from hospitals or those who have reported labour exploitation.

In recent years, Caritas has reduced its institutional collaborations, as in the past, it was often criticized for drawing attention to issues like illegal recruitment and poor working conditions, which some employers saw as damaging to the region's reputation (ITA_WP5_EXP_3). However, criticism was not limited to concerns over image. Caritas was also accused of stepping beyond its charitable role by addressing issues perceived as outside its mandate.

Third-sector cooperatives

Among the third-sector cooperatives active in Saluzzo, the Cooperativa Armonia has taken on an increasingly central role in addressing migrant workers' conditions, particularly through its involvement in anti-trafficking efforts, reception services, and the Multiprofessional Infopoint. The cooperative has expanded its activities through projects like Good Land and Common Ground, which allowed Armonia to conduct targeted interviews with potential victims of labour exploitation and improve territorial monitoring. Over the past five years, the cooperative has shifted towards a more structured and proactive approach. Regarding accommodation, Armonia has been involved in managing reception facilities for seasonal workers. Specifically, the cooperative has tried to mediate between employers and workers:

"When companies call us, we connect them with workers who can then sign contracts, while at the same time, we arrange their accommodation in diffused reception facilities."
(ITA_WP5_EXP_7)

Despite these efforts, collaboration between social cooperatives and agricultural businesses remains rare. Some positive examples emerged during the Good Land project, when Armonia established help desks within cooperative farms to support workers with residence permits and legal counselling. This initiative was particularly valuable because, thanks to the cooperation of a few employers, it addressed several critical issues, such as the matching of labour demand and supply in agriculture and problems tied to migrants' legal stay. In doing so, it attempted to bridge the gap between these two issues, which are fundamental both for workers and for employers. However, these initiatives were short-lived due to financial constraints. A key challenge remains the distrust from employers, who perceive the cooperative's role as a form of oversight rather than support. Some migrant workers housed in diffused reception filed labour disputes, which has made many business owners reluctant to engage with Armonia's initiatives (ITA_WP5_EXP_7).

Voluntary associations

Voluntary associations are fundamental in aiding migrant workers. During our fieldwork, we had the opportunity to meet the volunteers of the Makala Association, founded in 2021. This association is committed to supporting migrant workers, particularly those employed in the agricultural sector, and is composed of local volunteers who have mobilised to provide practical assistance and advocate for better living conditions. One of the main challenges Makala seeks to address is housing discrimination, as many landlords refuse to rent to foreign workers, even when they have legal documentation. Those who manage to find housing often face precarious living conditions, as they lack basic furniture and essentials.

Makala volunteers highlight that there is a positive interconnection among local organisations, which facilitates collaboration. This is also due to the fact that some volunteers are employed by other organisations working in migrant's assistance. For instance, some Caritas workers are also volunteers in the Makala Association, helping to create stronger networks across different initiatives. However, while volunteer work is essential, the interviewees stressed the need for professional staff to manage complex projects effectively. Recognising the work carried out by associations like Makala, including through adequate funding, would also allow for more stable and structured involvement of some volunteers.

Employers' associations

Among the employers' associations, Coldiretti is the most prominent in the Saluzzo district and plays a key role in managing migrant labour, representing the interests of farm owners and influencing labour policies. On the one hand, it advocates for the need for foreign workers to ensure the sector's productivity; on the other hand, agricultural employers face bureaucratic hurdles, difficulties in recruiting workers, and issues related to labour exploitation, particularly in seasonal employment.

In recent years, some employers have invested in improving workers' housing conditions, not purely out of altruism but to ensure greater efficiency in the workforce. However, challenges persist, especially regarding the seasonal nature of employment and the bureaucratic delays that sometimes leave workers in their home countries, waiting for visas. Coldiretti has had to address issues related to labour recruitment, as some companies are affected by exploitative labour intermediaries. In particular, there has been an expansion of labour cooperatives acting as intermediaries, some of them are legitimate, others are engaging in abusive practices

Coldiretti has also actively participated as a partner in various local projects and initiatives, particularly in the past when it was involved in efforts to improve accommodation for seasonal workers. Additionally, the organisation plays a fundamental role in the daily training and awareness-raising of employers regarding labour laws and fair employment practices.

One of the key responsibilities of Coldiretti is negotiating labour contracts. The organisation acknowledges the necessity of wage increases for workers but stresses the need to balance

these costs with the survival of agricultural businesses. Coldiretti has been in negotiations with trade unions, such as CISL and CGIL, for months to determine a fair and sustainable wage increase. However, Coldiretti also expresses concern about the way agricultural employers are increasingly being criminalised in public discourse. They often point to trade unions as contributing to this perception, accusing them of focusing disproportionately on exploitation while overlooking the economic difficulties faced by farmers. As a matter of fact, Coldiretti often highlights how current policies penalise the agricultural sector, for example, through high tax burdens that place farmers in a less competitive position. Coldiretti tries to promote Italian agricultural products through targeted campaigns. However, this is particularly challenging in the fruit sector, where the added value is relatively low compared to other products such as wine.

Moreover, Coldiretti warns against excessive assistance, fearing that an overly welcoming environment might attract more migrant workers than the local economy can sustain.

“We must not make the territory too attractive when we know that there aren’t enough jobs or housing for everyone.”(ITA_WP5_EXP_14)

IOM

A crucial element of IOM’s strategy has been the establishment of help desks within labour inspection offices, creating a safe space where migrants can report abuse without fear of employer retaliation. IOM has also organized joint operations with labour inspectors and the Carabinieri’s labour inspection unit, ensuring on-site intervention in cases of severe labour exploitation. These efforts go beyond sanctioning of illegal employment, as IOM works to activate protection mechanisms for victims. When cases of serious exploitation are identified, IOM supports the bureaucratic process for obtaining residence permits for victims of labour exploitation and, where needed, refers individuals to the SAI (reception system for asylum seekers and refugees) for shelter and integration support.

Despite these advancements, IOM has encountered challenges in fostering cooperation with some labour inspectors, who tend to prioritise sanctioning employers for employing undocumented workers, rather than focusing on the broader goal of protecting the exploited workers themselves. This approach, while legally justified, can overlook the complex needs of migrants who have suffered abuse or exploitation. To address this gap, IOM has invested in training programmes for labour inspectors, aiming to promote a more holistic and protective approach. As a matter of fact, IOM advocates for broader protection measures.

3.4.2 Frames

Non-state actors justify their strategies based on different frameworks. Firstly, trade unions justify their involvement in migrant labour issues through the **legal frame**, aiming to ensure compliance with labour laws and workers’ rights. However, they also acknowledge practical

difficulties that go beyond legal frames, such as the challenges of encouraging seasonal workers to file complaints (**licit frame**).

“We cannot do everything we would like to. It is especially difficult for us to convince seasonal workers to file complaints. Often, they have already left, and in other cases, they prefer to maintain good relations with their employers rather than raising issues.” (ITA_WP5_EXP_1)

Caritas acts based on moral and social values, advocating for what is preferable for migrant workers and society, even beyond what is strictly legal (**licit frame**). Moreover, given institutional limitations, Caritas focuses on providing immediate humanitarian aid and social services, addressing migrants' needs pragmatically rather than engaging in direct legal advocacy (**possibility frame**).

Third-sector cooperatives justify their interventions by supporting policies that align with national laws (**legal frame**). However, they also prioritise the well-being of workers, even if there are existing constraints, by developing partnerships with local authorities and businesses to improve workers' conditions (**possibility frame**).

Concerning voluntary associations their main justification is the need to promote an antiracist culture and social inclusion, rather than strictly adhering to legal obligations (**licit frame and possibility frame**).

“Our priority is to intervene on the social level, promoting the inclusion of migrants and their acceptance by the local population. We want to work against racism. We cannot intervene on a legal level, such as changing the rules for residence permits, but we can promote the socialization of young migrants. Many of them live in social segregation, with no opportunities for meeting others or enjoying activities outside of work. That’s why we organize mixed sports groups, reading sessions, and musical groups, situations where young Italians and young migrants come together. From this, even political engagement may arise.” (ITA_WP5_EXP_8)

4. Conclusions

As described in the report, the situation in the Saluzzo area is still critical and is caused by several interrelated factors. The most significant are economic pressures on agricultural companies from large-scale distribution (GDO) and legal and bureaucratic obstacles related to residence permits and access to services for migrant workers. These conditions lead many employers to lower labour costs and many workers to accept exploitative conditions due to a lack of alternatives or the urgent need to renew their residence permits.

In response to persistent structural problems, different actors adopt divergent strategies and provide contrasting interpretations of their own actions, reflecting the heterogeneity of their interests and priorities. We identified three analytically distinct frames through which actors

justify their actions. First, a **legal frame**, whereby actions are legitimized through references to formal legality and compliance with existing regulatory frameworks. Second, a **possibility frame**, in which actions are justified as the only viable or realistic courses of action given the structural constraints and situational conditions actors confront. Third, an **interest frame**, through which actions are framed as strategically oriented toward the protection or maximization of actors' material or symbolic interests. What emerges is a “local battleground” in which migrant workers bear the greatest costs: irregular employment contracts, extremely low wages, precarious housing conditions, and insufficient workplace safety. Migrant workers themselves are also highly fragmented and internally divided; in general, those with a more secure legal status and longer periods of residence in Italy tend to experience comparatively better working conditions.

Despite these challenges, initiatives such as the Good Land and Common Ground projects have had a positive impact. They succeeded in bringing together a wide range of actors (public institutions, trade unions, employers' associations, and civil society organizations) who previously were isolated. These projects fostered dialogue and launched important local initiatives. However, limitations remain: the actors involved often have different interests and employ diverse strategies and frames, which can lead to fragmentation.

This highlights the fact that the root causes are structural and systemic and cannot be fully addressed at the local level alone. Most current efforts rely on temporary projects rather than long-term structural policies. As a result, improvements in one area often led to a shift of the problem to neighbouring territories, as illustrated by the movement of asylum seekers from Saluzzo (fruit picking) to Alba (harvesting).

While local initiatives are crucial and often effective in the short term, they must be complemented by broader, structural reforms at both national and European levels to ensure fairer, more sustainable conditions for all stakeholders involved.

ANNEX: List of interviewees

	Interviewee	Coding
1	Representative from a trade union (CGIL Cuneo)	ITA_WP5_EXP_1
2	Representative from IOM Italy	ITA_WP5_EXP_2
3	Representative from Caritas Saluzzo	ITA_WP5_EXP_3
4	Representative from the municipality of Manta	ITA_WP5_EXP_4
5	Employer at a medium sized agricultural company	ITA_WP5_EXP_5
6	Employer at a medium sized agricultural company	ITA_WP5_EXP_6
7	Representative from a cooperative working on public accommodation services	ITA_WP5_EXP_7
8	Social worker at a local cooperative	ITA_WP5_EXP_8
9	Employer at a sub-contracting cooperative	ITA_WP5_EXP_9
10	Employer at a small sized agricultural company	ITA_WP5_EXP_10
11	Employer at a small sized agricultural company	ITA_WP5_EXP_11
12	Employer at a small sized agricultural company	ITA_WP5_EXP_12
13	Employer at a small sized agricultural company	ITA_WP5_EXP_13
14	Representative from an employers' association (Coldiretti Cuneo)	ITA_WP5_EXP_14
15	Academic expert	ITA_WP5_EXP_15
16	Journalist at a local newspaper	ITA_WP5_EXP_16
17	Social worker at a local cooperative	ITA_WP5_EXP_17
18	Representative from the Labour Inspectorate of Cuneo	ITA_WP5_EXP_18
19	Representative from the municipality of Saluzzo	ITA_WP5_EXP_19
20	Representative from the Piedmont Region	ITA_WP5_EXP_20
21	Representative from the Employment centre of Saluzzo	ITA_WP5_EXP_21
22	Migrant worker from Burkina Faso	ITA_WP5_IM_1
23	Migrant worker from Ghana	ITA_WP5_IM_2
24	Migrant worker from Burkina Faso	ITA_WP5_IM_3
25	Migrant worker from Mali	ITA_WP5_IM_4
26	Migrant worker from the Gambia	ITA_WP5_IM_5

27	Migrant worker from Ivory Coast	ITA_WP5_IM_6
28	Migrant worker from Nigeria	ITA_WP5_IM_7
29	Migrant worker from Mali	ITA_WP5_IM_8
30	Migrant worker from Albania	ITA_WP5_IM_9
31	Migrant worker from the Gambia	ITA_WP5_IM_10
32	Migrant worker from the Gambia	ITA_WP5_IM_11
33	Migrant worker from Burkina Faso	ITA_WP5_IM_12
34	Migrant worker from Pakistan	ITA_WP5_IM_13
35	Migrant worker from Mali	ITA_WP5_IM_14
36	Migrant worker from Guinea	ITA_WP5_IM_15
37	Migrant worker from Ivory Coast	ITA_WP5_IM_16
38	Migrant worker from Albania	ITA_WP5_IM_17
39	Migrant worker from Albania	ITA_WP5_IM_18

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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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