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Disputed space

The working and living conditions of migrant workers in the agro-industrial sector of Almería

Working Paper WP5 – National report

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Abstract

This report shows that the working and living conditions of agricultural workers in the agricultural sector of the Spanish province of Almería are far from optimal. This is illustrated by the persistence of temporary contracts for permanent jobs, wages well below those stipulated by the collective agreement, declared hours far below actual hours worked, non-payment of overtime, barriers to unionization, extremely harsh working conditions (e.g., exhausting shifts under extreme heat), and widespread substandard housing. Since exploitation and labour precarity are structural, explanations must go beyond individual accounts and address the root causes.

Based on intensive fieldwork the study demonstrates that the working and living conditions of workers are shaped by the actions and interactions of the different actors involved: 1) employers, who tend to justify low wages, flexibility, and informal practices as necessary for the competitiveness of the agricultural sector; 2) migrant workers, who above all need to secure income and residence rights, often at the expense of demanding fair conditions and legal compliance; 3) administrations, absent in labour matters, liberal in economic and trade matters, with an extremely limited role in social matters, and completely absent with regard to housing; and 4) non-state actors, who oscillate between the dilemma of facilitating work or justice, assistance or change.

Finally, the report concludes that existing policies often fail because they do not address the underlying contradictions of the agricultural model or the entrenched dynamics between actors. In addition, we see a labour and economic regime that is markedly (neo)liberal and an immigration regime that is initially closed, which together construct the ideal labour force to serve the “competitiveness” needs of the sector. Except in the realm of immigration, in labour, economic, and social matters (including housing), the state at various levels is conspicuously absent. Without addressing this fundamental issue, everything else will remain patches, band-aids, palliatives, or safety valves.

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1. Introduction

"Sea of Plastic" (in Spanish, Mar de Plástico) is the name given to an expanse of more than 30,000 hectares of greenhouses in the Andalusian province of Almería, in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula. The area is so vast, and the plastics so white and shiny, that it can be seen from space. So can the Great Wall of China, but in the case of the Plastic Sea, it is visible from higher orbits and even under adverse lighting conditions.

In addition to being known for its plastics, this area is also considered one of the largest "gardens of Europe." From there, nearly 3 million tonnes of vegetables are exported each year, especially peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, courgettes, watermelons, and melons. This accounts for 75% of the production and represents an annual turnover of more than 3.5 billion euros. The main destination countries are Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. In recent decades, agricultural production has become more sophisticated, partly due to market demands and especially the requirements imposed by large retail chains (e.g. Carrefour, Aldi, Lidl). As part of this same process, organic farming has also developed, which in municipalities like Níjar represents half of the cultivated area.

In the Spanish context, Almería is an example of the success of intensive agriculture, alongside Huelva and the Murcia countryside. The socio-labour dynamics are not very different from those in other intensive agricultural production areas but present some specificities. The literature highlights three in particular:

- **Permanent character**: The agriculture of Almería is characterized by having a duration of ten months, due to the overlapping of several crops (tomatoes, zucchini, peppers, watermelons, etc.) and the incorporation of summer products (e.g. watermelons, melons). Thus, the difference in foreign labour registrations between the month with the highest and lowest values is 23.5% (compared to 65% in Huelva and 94% in Jaén) (Pumares and González-Martín 2022: 120).
- **Small-scale ownership**: Another peculiarity is the size of the farms, most of which are small and family-run. Their highly decentralised nature shapes production dynamics and market adaptation. Some argue that this decentralisation distributes the sector's benefits, attributing greater "social sustainability" to the model (Galdeano-Gómez et al. 2016). At the same time, others argue that this model has negative effects: 1) many properties developed through self-exploitation of family labour; 2) productivity is not always improved, so profitability often depends on expanding the farms and reducing labour costs; and 3) many farmers respond with their own assets, making the survival of the farm (which holds value beyond the economic) a particularly dramatic experience (Pumares and González-Martín 2022: 121).
- **High residential segregation**: Many immigrants live (especially in the Levante area) outside urban centres, particularly among the greenhouses: in some cases, in old farmhouses; in others, in camps made of precarious constructions, mostly built with greenhouse plastics. This dynamic is compounded by periodic eviction of irregular

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settlements by local authorities. The level of inequality in the province of Almería is among the highest in Spain.

In the province of Almería, more than 90% of agricultural work (under greenhouses) is done by migrant workers. It is estimated that they exceed 100,000, of which 20–30% may be undocumented. Labour conditions are very diverse. However, cases of abuse seem not to be an exception: from payments below the minimum wage (4–6 euros per hour) and job insecurity to excessive working hours, unpaid overtime, precarious employment, lack of contracts, mistreatment, discrimination, and inhumane housing conditions. Systematic violations of the right to unionise or protest are also widely documented. In 2020, Philip Alston, UN rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, denounced the working and living conditions of migrant workers in the Andalusian agricultural sector. Regarding the settlements, he stated that, lacking access to running water and electricity in many cases, the situation "rivalled the worst he had seen anywhere in the world."

This report analyses the working and living conditions of immigrant workers in the agricultural sector in Almería, with special attention to the municipality of Níjar (in the east of the province). Three research questions structure the analysis:

- **Micro level**: What are the working and housing conditions of migrant workers? This question is mainly descriptive and aims to diagnose the problem to be explained;
- **Meso level**: How do the actions and interactions of the various actors involved, in a context marked by endogenous and exogenous factors, influence the migrant workers' working and living conditions? This question is explanatory and aims not only to understand the economic and social processes that determine these conditions but also to clarify to what extent these actors have the capacity (or not) to transform them.
- **Macro level**: Are policies and measures aimed at improving the working and living conditions of these workers effective? In recent years, there have been significant steps: from the increase in the minimum wage (from 900 euros in 2019 to 1,184 in 2025) to a new provincial agreement for the labour conditions of agricultural workers (2024), social conditionality criteria (especially from the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP), or quality certifications, including environmental and labour conditions. The question is to what extent these measures have represented an improvement and, whether they have or not, why. This question is again explanatory (about the functioning of policies) and seeks to identify the strengths and weaknesses (both in design and implementation) of these policies in order to rethink them.

This study was carried out based on the analysis of four sources:

1. **Academic literature** on the case of Almería (including publications following the El Ejido incidents in 2000) and reports on the agricultural sector and irregular settlements in the province by human rights organisations (e.g. APDHA, Ecologistas en Acción, Ethical Consumer, etc.), administrations (e.g. Junta de Andalucía,

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Observatorio de la Desigualdad en Andalucía), or private entities (mainly Cajamar, the province's main bank, linked to the agricultural sector);

2. **Press news**, searched specifically in relation to certain incidents, political statements, or press releases over reports issued by specific organisations;
3. **51 in-depth interviews**:
    - 41 conducted within the project, 39 by the researcher herself and 2 by directors Ofelia de Pablo and Javier Zurita for their documentary realised within DignityFIRM. Of these, 7 were with farmers, 12 with social entities, 2 with activists, 2 with trade unionists, 3 with politicians, 11 with migrant workers, and 1 with 3 representatives of the Spanish Police (Guardia Civil);
    - 10 with migrants provided by the social movement Regularización Ya;
4. **Two discussion groups**, one with Moroccan-origin workers linked to one of the unions (SAT-SOC) and another with lawyers from the main local entities on the effects of the flexibilisation of regularisation conditions from May 2025 on.

The report is structured in three parts. The first describes the case of Almería: how the countryside developed, its main characteristics, and the role immigration has played. The second focuses on the working and living conditions of the immigrant population. The third aims to explain these working and living conditions based on the actions (strategies and frames) of the main actors involved. In the conclusions, we return to the three questions that structure this study: 1) what are the working and living conditions of the migrant population?, 2) how do the different actors involved act and interact?, and 3) to what extent and why do policies fail?

2. The case of Almería

2.1. Historical Development

Historically, the province of Almería has been one of the poorest in Spain. Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo, in his classic novel *Campos de Níjar* (1960: 109), described it as the "Cinderella of our provinces" and its inhabitants as "extras, resigned and mute" in a history that never belonged to them, in which "they were never protagonists." Hence, as anthropologists Provansal and Molina (1987) noted, mobility became their only means of survival: labour mobility among the province's main economic sectors (agriculture, livestock, mining, and ceramics) and geographic mobility, with significant migratory flows to other Spanish regions, as well as to North Africa, South America, and later Europe (Lindner 2013: 541).

Everything began to change in 1952 when the Francoist government declared parts of Almería's countryside as zones of National Interest. To promote agricultural development, it created the National Institute of Colonization (INC) and developed several (re-)settlement programs with families from other areas of Almería and Granada. This included the

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construction of small towns like Campohermoso and San Isidro in Níjar and the distribution of small plots among settlers, who were advised and supported in implementing new cultivation techniques. This marked the beginning of intensive horticulture in Almería, in areas previously considered barren and unproductive.

According to Martínez Veiga (X: 102–121), the so-called "Almerian economic miracle" (González y González 1983) or the "green gold rush" (Fernández y Pizarro 1981) was made possible by the combination of four factors:

1. **Ecological factors**: A privileged climate for intensive agriculture, with high solar exposure—around 3,000 hours of sun per year; among the highest temperatures in Spain, with an annual average of 18.3°C and very moderate daily and annual fluctuations; and low risk of frost. In short, Almería barely has a winter. On the downside, the scarcity of rainfall (annual averages below 200mm) is a problem, although some areas have large underground water reserves.
2. **Technological factors**: The development of three key techniques. The first was "enarenado," which means placing a layer of sand over the soil to desalinate, prevent water evaporation, and retain heat, thus accelerating crop growth. The second was the construction of greenhouses to reduce wind effects and control thermal conditions. The third was drip irrigation, allowing controlled use of scarce water.
3. **Institutional factors**: Colonization plans and the creation of the INC promoted new agricultural techniques. Also crucial was the emergence of credit institutions like Caja Rural de Almería, founded in 1963, which soon became Spain's largest agricultural credit cooperative. These institutions have been and remain essential for purchasing land, agricultural machinery, building greenhouses, irrigation systems, etc.
4. **Organizational factors**: Farmers self-organized into product marketing entities. Initially, "alhóndigas" were created to auction goods, especially for the domestic market. Later, agricultural associations or commercial entities (cooperatives or SATs) were formed to handle product processing, packaging, transport, and sales. They also offer fiscal services and advice, and share information on seeds, water quality, new agricultural techniques, etc.

None of these factors would have sufficed without a substantial labour force, initially composed of family members. However, in the 1980s, this availability declined due to social reasons (children's schooling, rejection of strenuous tasks, appreciation of leisure time) and economic reasons (workers shifting to industry and services emerging around intensive agriculture) (Aznar y Sánchez 2001: 83). This labour shortage led to reduced cultivated areas, averaging just over one hectare per family unit (Aznar X: 83, 103). This underscores how crucial labour availability has been for the region's economic development (Provansal/Molina 1987; Martínez Veiga 2004).

After this impasse, the 1990s saw a second wave of agricultural expansion in Almería. Three central factors drove this new development: first, increased demand following the 1993 removal of restrictions on Spanish agricultural exports to other European countries; second,

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increased production through new agricultural techniques (irrigation systems, climate control, task computerization) and farm size growth; and third, the strong incorporation of foreign labour, mainly from Morocco. It was during this second growth phase that Almería became the "garden of Europe." While in 1985 Almería produced 1,000,000 tonnes of vegetables and 1,250,000 in 1990, by 2006 this figure had doubled to 2,841,000 tonnes. Export percentages also doubled, from 26% in 1990 to 53% in 2006 (Cajamar 2007, in Lindner 2013: 544).

Labour conditions for immigrant workers in Almería's countryside have been marked by high flexibility and precariousness. As for flexibility, their presence has met labour needs during peak periods (e.g., planting and harvesting), often filling the lowest positions in the labour hierarchy (Aznar y Sánchez 2001: 85). This has been accompanied by high turnover among immigrant workers across production units, contributing to their perception as temporary and replaceable labour, not "belonging" to any unit and thus with no one "responsible" for their welfare (Martínez Veiga 2003: 127–129). As for precariousness, despite being a key production factor, their wages have been extremely low: the Almería countryside agreement is the lowest in Spain (approx. 8,2 euros/hour in 2023), and it is well known that it has not always been respected. The cause is clear: lowering wages (or keeping them low) has been the farmers' primary strategy to reduce production costs (Aznar y Sánchez 2001: 86).

However, such precariousness, inequality, and spatial segregation eventually led to conflict. In February 2000, after two women were murdered by a Moroccan man, violence erupted against Moroccan immigrants in El Ejido. For several days, groups of locals led by the mayor engaged in a "hunt for Moors," destroying homes and shops. This prompted Moroccan workers to mobilize, strike, and protest for better working conditions. The response was swift: farmers requested workers from other countries, especially Romania and Lithuania, citing religious differences, lack of integration, and discipline issues among Moroccan workers. Academic literature described this as a process of "ethnic substitution" (Martínez Veiga 2003; Lindner 2013; Checa XX; Aznar y Sánchez 2001). Although the percentage of Moroccan immigrant workers dropped sharply for a few years, Eastern European and Ecuadorian workers left in the mid-run. By 2025, most workers are again of Moroccan and sub-Saharan origin. This highlights the border-like nature of Almería's economy, sustained by those who have just arrived or remain so marginalised that they have no other option.

In the 21st century, Almería's countryside has continued to evolve. Despite most farms remaining family-run, international markets have forced farmers into constant innovation and responsiveness to market demands, especially those set by large retail chains selling to end consumers. As Pedreño (2014: 82) notes for Murcia's agroindustry, this new phase has shifted from Fordist competitiveness logic (producing at the lowest possible cost without considering the consumer) to a quality logic driven by commercial imperatives. Thus, Northern European chains have come to dictate Southern producers' work methods, influencing organizational models, work rhythms, etc.

This has led to major changes in the agro-industrial sector. First, farmer cooperatives have become increasingly professional, reaching competitiveness levels similar to grower-marketer companies. Second, farmers have tried to extend growing seasons into a

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near "permanent spring" under plastic to meet constant international market supply demands and stabilize the massive need for wage labour. Third, facing increasingly competitive international markets with falling prices and rising costs, farmers' defensive strategies have again focused on reducing labour costs—i.e., controlling or lowering immigrant workers' wages. Fourth, although Almería's agriculture has historically been family-run and small-scale, farm sizes have increased, and significant investments from international capital and investment funds have emerged.

2.2. The Agro-Industrial Sector

In the province of Almería, highly qualified jobs are scarce. The service sector is small compared to the weight of the agricultural sector, which is four times the national average. 25% of the province's workers are employed in agriculture. Of these, nearly half are migrant workers, a percentage that rises to two-thirds among wage earners (Pumares and González-Martín 2022: 116). More than half of foreign-born men work in agriculture. As noted by Pumares and González-Martín (2022: 119), this indicates that the number of those working with contracts is not small. Women are less active (35% of labour registrations), working mainly in agriculture and wholesale trade (marketing and handling of horticultural products). Domestic work and prostitution are excluded from statistics due to their predominantly informal nature.

Here are some key figures about Almerian agriculture and its evolution:

- **Area**: In 1992, greenhouse area exceeded 20,000 ha; in 1996, 25,000 ha; in 2017, 30,000 ha; and in 2022, 32,827 ha (Cajamar 2022: 30). While the average farm size in the region of Andalusia is 17.8 ha, in the province of Almería it drops to 7.7 ha. For intensive greenhouse agriculture, the average in Almería is just 2 ha. 6,237 farms are under one hectare. Between 20–30% of farms are run by women (Junta de Andalucía 2020).
- **Number of workers**: Social Security-affiliated workers in Almería's agricultural sector rose from 60,044 in 2011 to 74,674 in 2022 (Cajamar 2022: 19). Foreign workers represent 68.5%. Most are from Morocco (55.1%), Romania (9.1%), Mali (8%), Senegal (8%), Ecuador (3.8%), Ghana (2%), Gambia (1.9%), Guinea Bissau (1.7%), Mauritania (1.4%), and Peru (0.9%) (Ibid: 20).
- **Products**: Main crops by area are peppers (12,452 ha), watermelon (8,695), tomato (8,555), courgette (8,142), cucumber (5,750), aubergine (2,318), and melon (2,107) (Junta Andalucía 2024: 24). In export terms: peppers (602,323 tonnes, €921.689M), cucumbers (527,447 tonnes, €617.555M), tomatoes (395,383 tonnes, €672.908M), and courgettes (319,281 tonnes, €380.203M) (Cajamar 2022: 45–48).
- **Organic farming**: EU-certified organic farming covers 4,382 ha of greenhouses, over 10% of the total area (Junta Andalucía 2024). Níjar is the European municipality with

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the largest area of sustainable organic horticultural production. Of its 6,000 ha of crops, half are certified organic, and this proportion is increasing (Diario de Almería).

- **Exports**: In 2021/22, 2,864,211 tonnes were exported, worth €3.701 billion (Cajamar 2022: 40). In 2024, this fell to €3.532 billion (EFE 2025). Main export destinations: Germany (920,783 tonnes), France (468,546), UK (387,317), and the Netherlands (291,989) (Cajamar 2022: 50).

2.3. Immigration

Until the 1980s, Almería was a province of emigration. Aznar (2000) estimates that in the first three quarters of the 20th century, half of Almería's population emigrated. Starting in the 1990s, the situation changed drastically, turning it into one of the provinces with the highest immigrant population. Thus, in the first two decades of the 21st century, 63% of demographic growth was due to immigration. In 2024, out of a total population of 761,000 inhabitants, foreigners represent 29%. In municipalities such as Níjar, Vícar, and El Ejido, this percentage rises to 47.1%, 33.3%, and 31.8%, respectively.

The majority of the foreign population in Almería originates from Morocco or Sub-Saharan Africa (Senegal, Mali, Ghana, etc.). Citizens from other European countries (especially the United Kingdom) also stand out, most of whom are already retired. Since the 2008 economic crisis, the population from Eastern Europe (especially Romania) has declined, as a result of the crisis's impact on the construction sector (where they were overrepresented) and also due to increased opportunities to migrate to other European countries (specifically, the United Kingdom).

As analyzed by Pumares and González-Martín (2022: 111), the foreign population in Almería is somewhat male-dominated, with 55% men. This is explained by the weight of African migrations, with more than 77% men in 1998 and more than 66% in 2021. However, in recent years, the gender balance has tended to even out, the presence of families with children has increased, and the average age among the foreign-born population has risen (previously dominated by the 25–34 age group, now the majority is 35–44). These are indicators that, despite everything, the immigrant population in Almería has become more settled. Most are located in the most dynamic municipalities, namely the city of Almería, Poniente (Roquetas and El Ejido area), and Levante (Níjar).

At the beginning of the century, Pumares (2003) had already identified Almería as one of the gateways for irregular immigration, not only because it is a border area but also due to the possibility of finding informal work, and therefore without needing a work permit. It is not surprising, then, that Almería played a significant role in the extraordinary regularization processes of the early 21st century. However, as Pumares and González-Martín (2022: 113) again show, many of those who regularized in the agricultural sector left the countryside shortly afterward to work in better-paid sectors (such as construction) or moved elsewhere. The 2008 crisis halted this exodus to other sectors: while those who could left for other

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countries, those who stayed (mainly Moroccans and Sub-Saharans) tended to return to agriculture. This explains why the internal migration balance tends to be negative during periods of economic growth and positive during times of crisis (Ibid 115).

3. Labour and living conditions

3.1. Legal status

Almería is a land of irregular arrivals by sea. That is, it is a borderland that also offers a first job opportunity in the agricultural sector (low-skilled, no need to speak the language, with high rates of informal work) for those who have just arrived. Since the early 2000s, various regularization processes and, since 2005, a permanent regularization mechanism via "arraigo" (rootedness) have allowed part of those in irregular situations to obtain legal status. As noted by Pumares and González-Martín (2023: 114), after each regularization process, the number of contracted workers in this sector increased substantially. At the same time, especially during economic booms, some newly regularized workers sought opportunities in other provinces and better-paid sectors. In short, once regularized, some have left.

This has a double effect: 1) employers are reluctant to regularize their employees, arguing that "it's pointless paperwork, they'll just leave"; and 2) employers end up depending on new arrivals—those in more precarious situations and with fewer options (starting with not having papers)—who are more willing to accept certain working conditions. Despite this, the number of people contracted in the agricultural sector (two-thirds of them foreigners) is not small (Pumares and González-Martín 2023: 119). This indicates that most work legally, that is, with papers and contracts. Irregular hiring seems especially common during occasional work peaks. In peak moments, irregular workers represent a readily available labour force, surviving on very few workdays and wages below those established by the collective agreement.

Finally, registration in the municipal census (known as the "padrón") is essential because it implies a certain level of local regularity, granting rights to healthcare, education, and future regularization processes (which require proof of residence, demonstrated via registration in "el padrón"). In the province of Almería, restrictive registration practices by local administrations are common. Not having adequate housing (i.e., living in informal settlements or overcrowded sublets) can result in denial of registration. Not being registered limits access to services and condemns irregular migrants to indefinite irregularity, preventing them from proving residency and thus accessing decent employment and living conditions.

Employer resistance to regularization and administrative resistance to registration have led to a dual phenomenon. On one hand, many workers pay employers to be regularized, often involving an initial fee of €5,000–€7,000 (Ent5), plus the social security costs for the first year. On the other hand, restrictive administrative practices have led to a flourishing black market for rental contracts and false registrations, with payments ranging from €500 to

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€2,000, amounts that, given the poorly paid and sporadic nature of irregular work, require years of savings.

3.2. Employment insecurity

The Provincial Collective Agreement for Agricultural Work (approved in November 2024 with representatives from both employers and workers) regulates labour relations in agricultural, forestry, and livestock operations in the province of Almería. According to the agreement, there are three types of contracts. The first is permanent, intended for work that is continuous and ongoing. At the other end, the second is temporary, which can only be granted due to production-related circumstances (work peaks tied to the production cycle) or to replace staff. In such cases, the employer must justify the need, and the duration must not exceed six months. To cover occasional situations arising from production cycles, it is also possible to make hires for a maximum of ninety days within the calendar year.

Midway between the two is a third type of contract defined as "fixed-discontinuous." This contract is used to cover work of a seasonal (not occasional) nature or linked to seasonal or intermittent productive activities with defined periods of execution. This type of contract has a maximum duration of 10 months per calendar year. At the beginning of the next season, fixed-discontinuous workers must be called back in strict order of seniority within each category, specialty, and workplace. That is, they retain the right to return when new job positions are offered at the start of the next season.

In practice, many workers report having had temporary contracts for years, despite the agreement stating that after three years of temporary contracts, they should be moved to fixed-discontinuous contracts. On the other hand, fixed-discontinuous contracts usually last 10 months, which corresponds to the campaign duration until summer (June and July), when the heat forces production to stop. These contracts entail greater precariousness (since they are renewed annually depending on the circumstances of the worker and employer) and require reliance on unemployment benefits for two months each year. Finally, the most precarious are irregular migrants who, as mentioned, serve as available labour (often for jobs offered for one or a few days) during work peaks, which are often difficult to predict in advance.

3.3. Income inadequacy

The workers' agreement sets a wage for field and warehouse workers at €8.2 per hour. Additionally, as mentioned, the minimum wage has increased from €900 per month in 2019 to €1,184 in 2025. In the case of overtime, the agreement states that it must be paid as extra. If it is due to force majeure—that is, performed to prevent or repair disasters and other extraordinary and urgent damage—it must be paid at the equivalent value of a regular hour. All other overtime not falling under this category must be paid with an extraordinary 75% premium.

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Although these measures represent a substantial increase in agricultural workers' income, in practice the reality is much bleaker. First, those working in irregular situations earn much lower wages, often between €4–€6 per hour. Second, the declared working hours often do not match the actual ones. In many cases, attendance sheets are falsified, declaring fewer hours or days worked, which ends up being a way to reduce the actual hourly wage. This strategy is not an exception. In interviews with migrant workers, unions, and social organizations, it is often mentioned that full-time work is carried out under part-time contracts. There are also reports of wages being declared higher than they actually are, with the worker having to return part of the amount received (e.g., payments of €10 per hour, with €300 returned to the employer at the end of the month). Finally, many workers also report not being paid for overtime or not being paid as such—that is, without the corresponding premium. In all cases, we see a consistent and recurring strategy to lower the cost of workers' hourly wages.

3.4. Lack of rights and protection

It seems it is not uncommon for companies to punish or even dismiss those who have joined a union or wish to do so. Cases have also been reported of isolation within the company for those who have joined a union or mobilized to demand more rights. In interviews, cases have also been detected of workers who were penalized after reporting their situations through the union. In any case, for those with temporary contracts and for those in irregular situations, unionizing or demanding more rights seems an impossible task. Finally, in the event of a strike, employers often resort to undocumented migrant workers.

Workers with temporary contracts receive very limited unemployment benefits. Those with fixed-discontinuous contracts have benefits that cover the months not worked. But in cases of illness or disability, their coverage is much lower than that of a permanent worker, since if they are on sick leave, they will not be hired in the next season. Although undocumented migrant workers do have labour rights and are protected by law, in practice they have no rights. There have been cases, in Almería and other provinces, where in the event of a workplace accident, the employer abandoned the worker in front of a medical center without further explanation. Cases have also been detected of people left disabled by workplace accidents who were left without any kind of benefit.

3.5. Work and living conditions

Reports from various NGOs on the ground, as well as interviews conducted as part of this study, highlight relatively common abusive practices. First, in many cases, workers operate under unsafe conditions. It is common to hear workers report working on greenhouse roofs without the necessary safety equipment, or performing tasks with chemicals (phytosanitary products) that require greater protection (e.g., use of masks). Mentions of exhausting workdays are also frequent. For example, a worker told *The Observer* in 2020 that

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"sometimes they worked from sunrise to sunset in extreme heat with only 30 minutes of rest all day." Complaints about the heat, especially inside greenhouses, and continuous work without the legally required breaks are common. In one interview, a worker reported having worked that day inside greenhouses at a temperature of 49 degrees (Int33). Harsh material conditions and monotonous work are also mentioned. Accidents on the way to work are frequent, as workers travel by bike, scooter, or on foot along roads that are not adapted and lack visibility.

Cases of discrimination based on origin, legal status, and gender are also reported. Moroccan and Sub-Saharan workers are systematically assigned the hardest tasks inside greenhouses and, at the same time, have the most precarious and lowest-paid contracts. Romanians, those who still work in the fields (many have moved to other regions and sectors), hold more responsible and better-paid positions. In interviews and in several reports by various NGOs, female workers mention difficulties (or limited time) to go to the bathroom, reproaches for not working harder, tasks involving lifting weights beyond their capacity, or cases—though seemingly more isolated—of sexual harassment. In general, men work in greenhouses and women in the handling area, where there are also Spanish female workers. Regarding the settlements, 90% are men and 10% women. Of these, a significant portion (some estimate 30%) survive through prostitution (sometimes under trafficking conditions) in extremely precarious circumstances.

Regarding housing, it is important to note the substandard living conditions of many migrant workers. Some live in urban substandard housing, often sublet and in conditions of severe overcrowding and lacking basic habitability (e.g., without a kitchen or ventilation). Others live in shantytown settlements near the greenhouses, often with limited access to water and electricity. According to a report by the Andalusian Human Rights Association (APDHA), it is estimated that 7,000 people live in informal settlements in Almería. If we also counted vertical settlements or those in urban areas, the number would be much higher.

Regarding the healthcare system, in Spain, registration in the municipal census (padrón) grants access to healthcare, which is designed to be universally accessible to anyone residing in Spain regardless of legal status. Moreover, in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia, access is even more guaranteed, as it does not require census registration (which, as mentioned, is sometimes obstructed for those without adequate housing), and the health card can be directly managed by social organizations. However, sometimes undocumented immigrants who cannot register (due to lack of formal housing, which is used by municipalities to exclude them) end up going to emergency services every 3–4 months to generate proof for future regularization. This overloads the system and distorts its functioning, as doctors cannot always determine when there is a genuine medical reason behind the visit (Ent12).

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4. Actors' strategies and frames

4.1. Employers

Farmers' strategies aim to respond to two demands: the need to reduce costs in a context of falling prices and rising expenses; and the need to respond to fluctuating labor demands, especially during production peaks.

Need to reduce costs:

- *Reducing labor costs:* According to one interviewed farmer, 70% of production costs are labor-related (Ent1). Hence, efforts are often made to cut total costs by reducing labor costs. This often involves paying below the rate set by the collective agreement (between €5 and €6 per hour instead of €8–9, especially for undocumented workers), contracting for fewer hours than actually worked, not paying overtime, hiring workers as low-skilled even when they perform specialized tasks, or maintaining temporary or fixed-discontinuous contracts (to save on social security contributions during the two summer months when production stops).
- *Changing other factors:* Other strategies include switching to crops that require less labor (e.g., melon), increasing cultivated area to boost profits, investing in mechanization and innovation, producing organic (products with slightly higher profit margins), supplementing with other jobs (e.g., driving-school teacher, agricultural expert), abandoning farming altogether, or selling/renting the land.

Need to respond to production peaks:

- *Temporary employment agencies (ETTs):* Only large companies resort to temp agencies during production peaks. In these cases, payment is per worker.
- *Collas:* In other cases (e.g., harvesting watermelons, melons, greenhouse whitening), collas (groups of workers under a supervisor) are hired and paid a fixed amount for a specific task (not per hour or per worker).
- *Sporadic workers:* Most employers look for workers to perform occasional tasks through acquaintances or current employees. This sporadic hiring can be formal or informal. Many references, from workers, employers, unions, and social organizations, mention informal hiring during peak times. In fact, irregular workers often survive on day-to-day jobs. Many interviewees refer to roundabouts, where each morning (undocumented) workers wait to be picked up by a farmer who needs help that day.

Frames used to justify cost-cutting and peak-response strategies vary:

- *Market dynamics:* Farmers argue that the market is subject to the interests of large distributors, who speculate by manipulating prices. Several farmers justified it as follows:

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- "If prices aren't fair, working conditions aren't fair. If prices aren't decent, you can't get through the season. If there's no price stability, there's no job stability" (Ent8).
- "Supermarket chains set the weekly price. If you're interested, fine; if not, too bad. Distributors impose the conditions. They know that when you have a lot of stock, you have no choice but to sell quickly. So they set the price, knowing you'll sell no matter what. Farmers can't wait (...). Farmers are subordinated to market demands" (Ent10).
- "The big concern is price uncertainty. (...) We want stability. We want certainty" (Ent11).
- "Everything is going up (inputs, seeds, electricity). Meanwhile, prices depend on supermarket chains and the weather. We're always under pressure. We know what we pay but never what we'll receive" (Ent19).
- Regarding organic products: "They criticize farmers as if we were criminals. But if you do things right, you don't make it. It's a constant unease. (...) The system prevents me from receiving the added value of organic. I get paid the same, while supermarkets charge more: they pocket the difference, the extra €1.50 for organic. Farmers don't get paid the extra cost" (Ent22).

A member of a social organization and a former councilwoman from Níjar partially supported the argument:

- "That prices dictate working conditions is half reality, half narrative. It's reality because prices fluctuate, so there's no guaranteed profit. Some years you make a lot, others you lose. But it's also a narrative because it justifies non-payment. Farmers should plan beyond occasional losses. Workers don't work on commission. But even workers end up accepting these arguments" (Ent13).
- "Here, agriculture is precarious from end to end. Farmers always say: if I made more money, I'd pay more. But if that's the case and they can't guarantee workers' conditions, they should shut down. You can't profit at the expense of workers" (Ent17).

- *Effects of free market:* Some farmers, especially those more politically active (e.g., union representatives), see market deregulation and trade liberalization with countries like Morocco and Mercosur as part of the problem, since production costs in those countries are lower. They argue this forces them to lower prices, which indirectly means cutting labour costs.
  - "When third countries with very low production costs enter the market, our negotiation becomes even more impossible. It distorts everything. We demand that these imports be monitored. Europe is liberal in trade. Europe legislates on everything except customs control. There's no will to monitor. In the Netherlands,

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imports aren't controlled. The port of Rotterdam is open, it's the cradle of commerce" (Ent11).

- "Mercosur is huge. Large volumes are bought outside Spain and the EU. These volumes must be sold before ours. They prefer buying there, even if transport costs are higher. They want quantity. They want 200, not 2" (Ent39).

- *Rising wages:* Some farmers also mention that labour costs (due to rising wages) have increased exponentially in recent years, much more than selling prices, which have remained stable or declined.
    - "Margins used to be higher. But now labor and environmental demands have increased. Wages have grown exponentially in recent years, without a corresponding increase in margins. This raises costs" (Ent16).
    - "Four or five years ago, workers wages were €684; now they are €1,080. It wasn't a gradual increase—it had to be absorbed quickly" (Ent22).
- *EU responsibility:* Farmers, especially the politically active ones, lament that the EU not only fails to solve their problems but in some ways causes them. They present five arguments. First, trade liberalization policies without customs controls make it hard to maintain fair prices. Second, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) does not allow direct aid to their sector. According to a representative of the farmers' association, aid is directed "toward large cereal landowners" (Ent11). Third, they denounce that the Directive "on unfair trading practices in the agricultural and food supply chain" is insufficient, due to lack of ambition and only partial implementation in national laws. They argue it should be a regulation, not a directive. In practice, according to them, abuses by large chains continue. Fourth, they see the EU as responsible for excessive bureaucracy, including environmental matters. Fifth, they denounce that systemic contradictions remain unchanged and that no one is interested in changing them. A farmer from El Ejido expressed it this way: "Europe works like this. It wants big, pretty, cheap tomatoes. Europe is hypocritical. Europe needs slaves. They want organic but cheap, so they don't lack anything, to maintain their lifestyle" (Ent22).
- *Planning difficulties:* Many employers also mention the difficulty of planning for production peaks and the slowness of the system in making quick hires. A small organic vegetable farmer, who claims to be one of the few hiring fairly and legally, gave the following example: for watermelon harvesting, farmers depend on "collas" specialized in cutting the watermelon. These collas cut but don't collect the fruit. One year, he was called on a Saturday morning and told they were on their way and would finish that day. The watermelons had to be collected immediately. He argued he had no choice but to go to the town center to find migrant workers willing to work that same day (Ent22). A state security officer confirmed: "The system isn't agile. If you go to the employment office, you're too late" (Ent34).
- *Lack of hireable labour:* Farmers often mention the lack of hireable labor—that is, people with residence permits allowing legal employment (Ent6). Hence, farmers' unions support

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facilitating regularization (Ent11). Some also collaborate with social organizations in training and job placement programs. At the same time, some social organizations denounce that employers (especially large ones) demand a series of requirements (e.g., training, language skills) that don't match the working conditions (temporary contracts) and wages (low pay) they offer (Ent30). At the root of the problem is the fact that those who can leave (to other provinces and sectors) do so. This creates a constant need for new workers: "In the end, you have a pool of labor that rotates—these people get fed up, leave when they can, and it all starts over again, with people willing to endure these conditions for a while" (Ent12).

Throughout the interviews, references also appear to differences between large and small farmers. Among large farmers, the relationship with workers seems more formalized, although irregularities are still detected, such as abuse of temporary contracts, underpayment of worked hours, non-recognition of overtime, or pressure not to unionize. It is also noted that in these cases, the relationship between employer and worker is more distant, so abuses and bad practices may occur between supervisors and workers without the employer necessarily being aware.

Among small farmers, irregular hiring seems more common, and worker exploitation can become a survival strategy for less viable farms. Many interviewees (farmers, social organization representatives, activists, academics) comment that in these cases, migrant worker exploitation is accompanied by self-exploitation by the farmers themselves, which was a key element in the early days of Almería's agriculture. At the same time, among small farmers, in addition to proximity to the worker, there is also a particular interest in retaining good workers, since turnover can also become a problem. Hence the offers of regularization, although—as both sides argue—this may mean the worker may eventually leave for better-paid sectors. Based on the interviews conducted, the impression is that for this reason, farmers are increasingly reluctant to regularize.

4.2. Workers

Migrant workers follow a dual strategy: on one hand, securing income to survive—both for themselves and their families, wherever they may be; on the other hand, securing rights—residency rights, labour rights, social rights, and the right to family reunification. These two strategies go hand in hand, complement each other, and at times may contradict one another. They translate into different decisions depending on the circumstances.

Securing income:

- For undocumented workers, this means working as many hours as possible, under whatever conditions are necessary (wages, labour), always under the promise of more work and, in the medium term, greater stability. Some irregular workers work for a single employer, which increases their stability but also dependency—not only in terms of income but also future prospects. Others work sporadically, with jobs lasting one or a few days, with almost no stable link to the employer.

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- For workers with residence and work permits, this may involve two opposing strategies. On one hand, working more hours to earn more or accepting certain conditions out of fear of losing the job. On the other hand, demanding better wage conditions, considering the hours worked or the level of specialization. A third possibility, which most interviewees say is the most common, is changing sector, province, and/or country – when possible – in search of better wage and labour conditions.

Securing rights:

- For undocumented workers, everything is determined by the goal of regularization, which requires being registered in the municipal census (padrón) for a period of 3 years (from May 2025, 2 years) and having a job offer. Due to irregular practices by municipalities, registration can be jeopardized by the lack of adequate housing. Living in an informal settlement or in substandard housing (e.g., subletting) can thus hinder registration. Social organizations are fighting to force municipalities to register individuals regardless of housing status. Individually, many workers end up paying for registration (between €500 and €1,200). According to interviewees, this happens either by registering at a third party's home or through a false address registration, supposedly facilitated by someone close to the town hall. The job offer depends on the employer. Many workers interviewed accepted certain working conditions (poorly paid, very harsh) based on the employer's promise of a job offer for regularization. This offer—and with it, regularization—may or may not materialize. In many cases, workers end up paying for this job offer (between €5,000 and €7,000) and for the social security costs associated with the contract during the first year.
- For documented workers, securing rights may again (as with income) mean one thing or the opposite. In some cases, especially when they still have a temporary residence permit or are awaiting family reunification (which depends on income and housing conditions), the best way to secure rights is to accept existing labour conditions, whatever they may be. That is, due to insecurity—whether in residence status or the reunification process—they remain subordinated to the need to have a job (full-time) and, therefore, to the employer's will (for better or worse). In other cases, especially when these rights are already secured, the strategy may involve demanding greater labour rights—essentially compliance with the collective agreement and, therefore, the law (e.g., payment of overtime, declaration of all hours worked, a permanent contract). It is no surprise that the most labour-mobilized workers are those who have been around the longest, most of whom are of Moroccan origin. Here are some quotes that confirm these observations:
    - "Agriculture works as a gateway. Then they leave. For €40–60 a day, who would stay? It's hard work but not skilled. You don't need training, language skills, or even papers. And there's always work. Those who can do more qualified work, once they have papers, leave. The others stay." (State security officer, Ent34)

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- "When you're afraid, you stay silent." The farmer had promised to fix his papers. He worked for €5 an hour. For 7 years, doing all kinds of tasks, even specialized ones. Finally, after 7 years, the contract came. They issued a payslip for 24 days. When he asked for it to reflect the actual days, they fired him. You endure a lot, a lot, a lot. He would say, "you, Black man, get out of the shelter." "When you ask for rights, they throw you out and hire someone else." (Ent37)
- "Supervisors punish those who ask for rights." They assign them the hardest tasks. They may even not renew their contracts. (Ent29)
- "New people work more hours, do whatever they're told. Africans [said by a Moroccan worker] are afraid, don't speak the language, don't know their rights. They accept much more. When there's an inspection, they're told not to go." (Ent31)

Regarding the frames used to explain the strategies workers employ to secure income and rights, two major tensions should be noted:

- *Between rights, income, and justice:* To earn more or secure rights, workers often end up accepting unfair conditions, which also means accepting violations of the law (particularly the collective agreement). This highlights how the sector depends—not occasionally but structurally—on the availability of subordinated labour. The subordination is twofold: due to the need to survive and the requirement to have a job (and housing) as a necessary condition to obtain, renew, or maintain a residence permit or the right to family reunification.
- *Between the individual and the collective*: Most strategies are individual, aimed at gradually securing more rights and income through a path that may be more tortuous for some than others (depending on individual capabilities, gender, origin, education level, and luck). Those who succeed tend to leave. Those who don't, stay. Collective strategies to improve working and living conditions are few. Some workers, especially of Moroccan origin, engage in union activism (particularly with the Andalusian Workers' Union, SOC-SAT). However, they themselves say they are few: because some have just arrived and have few rights, or because those who have been around longer, and therefore have more rights and opportunities, either choose to protect what they have and not risk it, or choose to leave. This echoes what Krastev said about immigration in his book *After Europe* (2017): migrants try to change their conditions at home not by changing the country, but by changing countries.

4.3. State actors

There are a multitude of state actors whose actions (or inactions) determine the working and living conditions of migrant workers. These actors belong to different areas (labour and economic, immigration, housing and social affairs) and to different levels of administration

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(European, national, regional, and local). Below, we analyze the position and relationship between these different actors in relation to each of the three policy areas.

4.3.1. Labour and economic area:

A series of policies and measures aim to regulate and improve the working and living conditions of agricultural workers. At the Spanish level, the minimum wage has substantially improved hourly compensation. In addition, the new collective agreement (approved at the end of 2024) improves the wage and labour conditions of Almerian agriculture workers in several aspects (see section 3). At the European level, mention should be made of the Directive regulating the agricultural and food supply chain and the principle of social conditionality of the CAP. However, all these policies are more real on paper than in practice. On a day-to-day basis, their effect is very limited. Basically for two reasons:

- *Multilevel governance:* European policies are diluted in their national transposition, which can be very heterogeneous across member states. In addition, fragmentation into different national legislations (with different systems) makes it difficult to report bad practices, first because it requires navigating different national contexts and second because large supermarket chains tend to operate transnationally. As a representative of a farmers' union argued, "just because Aldi or Carrefour buys from you doesn't mean they sell exclusively in Germany or France. So where do you file the complaint?" (Ent11).
- *Lack of implementation:* Labour policies stand out for their inability to ensure compliance in practice. For example, the increase in the minimum wage or the improvement of wage conditions under the collective agreement has not necessarily led to an increase in the hourly rate, since in many cases (not isolated practices) far fewer hours are declared than actually worked, overtime is not paid, or in some cases part of the salary is returned to the employer. All this is explained by the very limited nature of labour inspections. Among the interviewees, there is unanimous agreement on this point:
    - "There are very few resources to identify fraud. Meanwhile, €60 million a year is lost due to unpaid social security contributions" (unionist, Ent5);
    - "There are WhatsApp groups where farmers warn each other when the inspection arrives" (Podemos politician, Ent6);
    - "There are labour inspections if there are complaints but not surprise or random ones. There are WhatsApp groups to warn each other" (farmer, Ent8);
    - "There are 8–9 inspectors for thousands of companies. The incapacity is absolute. Why? Because it's not in their interest, because it would increase the cost/price of the product. When inspectors arrive, the worker is indoctrinated. They know what to say to the labour inspection, even those who issue

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certifications. Payslips are often not real: either because money is returned to the employer each month or because they work more hours" (unionist, Ent10);

- "There's a lot of fraud. The problem is that inspectors call before making the visit. Then employers send undocumented workers home" (worker, Ent31);
- "When there's an inspection, farmers warn each other. And undocumented immigrants run away" (security force member, Ent34).

From the perspective of strategies and arguments, policies sometimes function more as discourse than as regulations that set the limits of what is possible. Instead, reality is shaped more by what is not done, by what is said but not acted upon. These are policies that function more as arguments, and realities are determined (or explained) by inaction.

4.3.2. Immigration area:

Immigration policies, on the other hand, are characterized by a high degree of enforcement. In other words, unlike those in the labour and economic sphere, their ability to shape reality is absolute. In a dual sense, both negative and positive.

- *Negative,* because immigration policies define irregularity, which as we have seen is key to determining the subordination of newly arrived migrant labour. One could say that irregularity illustrates the non-compliance with immigration laws. But it serves the function of disciplining the most precarious labour force, which is a structural element of the system, especially during production peaks.
- *Positive,* because after a few years of "penitence" (i.e., irregularity), it allows for an exit. This works in two ways: first, the promise of future regularization gives meaning to the years of irregularity, in the sense that it makes them "bearable" while waiting to finally obtain "papers." As argued elsewhere (Chauvin & Garcés 2014), the prospect of regularization lays the foundation for a moral economy of irregularity: first, by disciplining them (e.g. turning them into a subordinate and docile labour force) in the hope of a better life; and second, after a few years, by allowing for the release of those who have endured these conditions, thereby preventing the situation from becoming chronic (at least for some), while awaiting new arrivals, which would bring new promises and new docilities.

In the field of immigration policies, there is more strategy than argument. Put differently, policies shape reality without the need for much discourse—or rather, by avoiding putting words to it (regarding the creation of docile and subordinate labor). The issue of implementation is configured in a completely different way: the lack of immigration controls is a fundamental element in the construction of irregularity, while regularization policies function as a lure: for workers to obtain more rights, for employers to retain workers. The problem arises with the subsequent "escape," when workers "flee" to other sectors or regions, which makes employers increasingly reluctant to regularize and, consequently, calls into question the fluidity (regular entries and exits) of the system.

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4.3.3. Housing and social sphere:

Here, the key administration is the local one. However, its action is conspicuously absent.

- *In the area of housing*, housing has traditionally been left in the hands of the private sector. There is very little public housing in Spain. Additionally, other circumstances come into play, such as the fact that those most in need of housing precisely do not vote; or those who do vote would view any policy aimed at "the others" unfavourably. Also, there is the issue of proposing housing solutions for people without residence permits and, therefore, supposedly not "eligible" by the state. Given all these reasons, most local administrations have focused their efforts on evicting settlements. One of the reasons that are given is that these settlements (particularly in Níjar) are highly visible for tourists visiting Cabo de Gata and give a poor image, also to end consumers. Attempts to build alternative housing have been almost inexistent.
- *In the area of social services*, as we will see below, support for the migrant-origin population falls almost exclusively to social organisations. This implies a certain privatization of the state's obligations, via subsidies to social organisations. The only exception is healthcare, which remains in the hands of the public sector and whose access is guaranteed not only to the "undocumented" but even to those who cannot prove they have a fixed address and therefore face difficulties to be registered in the municipal census (which in other autonomous communities is an essential requirement for accessing healthcare).

This lack of support, which translates into a widespread situation of substandard housing and high social exclusion, along with often precarious and precarizing working conditions, shapes the Almería model and makes it a highly explosive case (alongside others such as Murcia or Huelva).

4.4. Non-state actors

4.4.1. Social organisations:

In the province of Almería, there are a number of social organizations (Red Cross, Cepaim, Almería Acoge, Doctors of the World, Women in Conflict Zones, Jesuit Service, Mercenarias) that provide support to the migrant population at risk of social exclusion. They offer language courses, legal advice, training programs, job placement and mediation programs, residential inclusion programs, specific services and support to women working in prostitution, and other programs addressing the specific needs of settlements. Some interviewees distinguish between organizations funded by public subsidies and those with their own funding (religious ones like the Mercenarias and the Servicio Jesuita al Migrante), which would have much more independence in setting their priorities (Ent14).

Other interviewees (also members of the organizations themselves) question the role of social organisations, which serve to alleviate the "ills of the system" (as a "safety valve," "sedation," "palliative care") but without aiming to change it (Ent5, Ent10). This brings up the eternal

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question of how to go beyond the always necessary and urgent assistance work. In the interviews, the dilemma also arises of what comes first: work or justice. Denouncing and opposing certain labour abuses (e.g., payment for fewer hours than worked, non-recognition of overtime, demands for vacation and transportation, etc.) can lead workers to lose their jobs. The opposite implies accepting the violation of legality and, in a way, makes the organizations complicit. The dilemma is not exclusive to the organizations and, in some way, reflects the strategies of migrant workers themselves, who often choose to prioritize the "security" of income or the "promise" of more rights over demands for justice and legal compliance.

4.4.2. Unions:

The two major unions (CCOO and UGT) are mainly focused on the handling sector, where there are more Spanish workers and where work is more formalized (Ent6). In contrast, they do not engage in the greenhouse sector, which is characterized by much more precarious work, with more than 90% migrant workers and high levels of informality. According to a CCOO unionist, "the role of the unions is minimal. (...) In agriculture, union membership doesn't even reach 1%. It's a vicious cycle: the worse the conditions, the less you join; since you don't join, labour conditions don't improve, and therefore there's less capacity for change. Without membership, we have no resources and no capacity. (...) We're not able to reach the fields. We limit ourselves to large companies, with many workers, with works councils. In small ones [which are the majority in Almería], there's no capacity for worker organization. Only small patches can be applied. We don't reach the fields, the union can't deliver" (Ent10).

In contrast to CCOO and UGT, SOC-SAT (Field Workers' Union and Andalusian Workers' Union) has a greater presence. According to a unionist from another union, SOC-SAT has two full-time staff dedicated to union work in the Almerian agriculture, which facilitates a much more structural presence. In recent years, SOC-SAT has achieved 10% representation in Almerian agriculture and handles more than 1,000 complaints annually. It also organizes mobilizations and has won important rulings against major agricultural companies like BioSabor. According to one of its representatives, "when the conditions established in the legal framework are not met, there are two options: inspections or union struggle" (Ent5). Everyone agrees that the first is very limited. Regarding the second, there is no doubt that SOC-SAT has achieved significant victories: from getting certain employers to pay for hours worked, overtime, vacations, or cover transportation to the farm, to drawing attention to certain companies through worker mobilizations and advocacy work to raise awareness of rights violations in the Almerian agriculture. While there is no doubt that their achievements are notable, some interviewees question their confrontational methods, which in some cases may put the jobs of mobilized workers at risk (Ent3, Ent10). Again, the tension and dilemma between work and justice arises.

In conclusion, a CCOO unionist stated: "We don't have tools that allow us to move forward. We only have a shield, which allows us to withstand attacks from employers. But we don't have a spear that allows us to advance. There is no class consciousness, no culture of demands or collective struggles. (...) Because of all this, unionists are not going to improve the

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situation. We are not the solution. We can only provide protection and reactive responses to problems. The solution and alternative to the exploitation system we have can only come from the state" (Ent10).

4.4.3. Migrant organisations:

Several interviewees point out that there are hardly any migrant organizations, and they explain this by the fact that it is a place of transit, both geographically and in terms of the economic sector. Those who can, leave. Those who stay try to survive, without much capacity for self-organization. In the Poniente area (El Ejido, Roquetas), intensive agriculture—and therefore immigration—started earlier, and there are some organizations, although small, origin-based, and without much labour or advocacy ambition.

4.4.4. Certifications:

There are certifications like GlobalGras, Natur, and Demeter that include social conditions. However, most interviewees agree that they are "greenwashing," a "fairy tale" to "clean up" the sector's image and "ease" consumers' consciences (Ent5). A unionist noted that, as with labour inspections, employers "indoctrinate" workers to say what is expected.

- "No matter how many interviews you do, no matter how often you come, in the end it's useless. You can show a payslip with all the conditions, but the reality may be very different. There's no guarantee that conditions are met; the worker is indoctrinated—if not, they lose their job. Moreover, certifications don't monitor subcontractors or related producers. There are certifications that, if the farmer doesn't meet the requirements, prevent them from selling in certain places. This means the farmer loses the client, the outlet for the product. Therefore, the farmer does whatever it takes. Compliance is forced: for example, paying the necessary payslips (even if the worker later has to return part of the payment). It's a deep perversion. If you don't comply, you don't sell. If I can't comply, the product doesn't matter. It's a problem. Some certifiers come with good intentions, but it doesn't improve. What matters is the price (not the certification). Certification is part of the system—you have to buy it. They are private companies, not public ones. (...) Certifications are seen as a cost. The farmer uses certification as an excuse, but certification is part of the economic system. It's neither free nor public—they are private companies. Certifiers are also interested in you getting certified; otherwise, they lose the client. The economic system corrupts everything. You can't demand conditions and then not provide guarantees. The solution lies in the public sector" (Unionist, Ent10).
- "Certifications should be banned. Our farmers' union is against private certifications, where each supermarket wants its own label. They drive us crazy! We advocate for public certifications. Ask me for the standard, compliance with the law. Private certification goes beyond the standard. We must demand compliance with regulations, not absurd conditions. These certifications demand many things. They represent the double standards of supermarkets: on one hand, they demand quality

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protocols. On the other, they impose unfair prices" (farmer and farmers' union representative, Ent11).

5. Conclusions

This research began with three questions. Here we present succinct answers as conclusions:

What are the working and housing conditions of migrant workers? The working and housing conditions are highly diverse. In the municipality of Níjar alone, there are 12,000 people of migrant origin, of whom 8,000–9,000 live in the main population centers, many have stable jobs, and some are even farmers. However, this study concludes—aligned with various reports published on the same issue—that abuse and irregularities are not exceptions but structural components of how the sector operates. For example, the study documents: the persistence of temporary contracts for permanent jobs, wages well below those stipulated by the collective agreement, declared hours far below actual hours worked, non-payment of overtime, barriers to unionization, extremely harsh working conditions (e.g., exhausting shifts under extreme heat), and widespread substandard housing. Since exploitation and labour precarity are structural, explanations must go beyond individual accounts and responses (focused on criminal law interventions aimed at punishing unscrupulous employers or intermediaries) and address the root causes.

How do the actions and interactions of the various actors involved influence the working and living conditions of migrant workers? The analysis of strategies and arguments from the various actors involved shows that the working and living conditions of migrant workers are shaped by the actions and interactions of each of them: 1) Employers, who act to reduce labour costs and respond to production peaks; 2) Migrant workers, who above all need to secure income and rights, often at the expense of demanding fair conditions and legal compliance; 3) Administrations, absent in labour matters, liberal in economic/trade matters, with an extremely limited role in social matters, and completely absent with regard to housing; 4) Non-state actors, who oscillate between work and justice, assistance and change. Finally, certifications leave legal compliance in the hands of the market, which becomes the enforcer, without addressing the underlying structural forces.

What is the effect of policies and measures aimed at improving the working and living conditions of these workers? Twenty-five years after the events in El Ejido, not only has nothing changed, but everything has worsened. How can this be explained, considering that measures have been developed to improve workers' labour and wage conditions, to ensure fairer food supply chains, or to improve the living conditions of migrant workers? The answer is that labour policies (not lacking in ambition) have remained mostly on paper, without ensuring systematic implementation in practice; economic policies have remained liberal (they do not guarantee fair prices for farmers), and here too policies have remained confined to discourse and lost in multilevel governance (consider the Directive on unfair trading practices); immigration policies construct the border that subordinates migrant workers (at least in the early years); and social and housing policies are glaringly absent.

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To sum up, we see a labour and economic regime that is markedly (neo)liberal and an immigration regime that is initially closed, which constructs the ideal labour force to serve the "competitiveness" needs of the former. Except in the realm of immigration, in labour, economic, and social matters (including housing), the state at various levels is conspicuously absent. Without addressing this fundamental issue, everything else will remain "patches, band-aids, palliatives, or safety valves."

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Working Paper WP5 – National report

Disputed space

The working and living conditions of migrant workers in the agro-industrial sector of Almería

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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