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Introduction

The EU's agricultural sector regularly employs 25 million people, while several additional millions estimated to engage in irregular employment. Despite representing the core workforce of rural areas, workers endure dire working and living conditions, exacerbated by social and physical isolation. Recent EU policies, including the Common Agricultural Policy and the Rural Pact, fail to fully address this problem. This state of affairs endangers the entirety of rural development across the EU.

Dignifying agricultural work underpins the success of European rural development. Therefore, we advocate for comprehensive policy measures that address stakeholders from local to EU level under three themes: empowering local actors, improving working conditions, and enhancing living conditions for agricultural workers.

Who are the seasonal agricultural workers?

Every year **about 1 million seasonal agricultural workers** are hired across the European Union. Germany, Italy, Spain, France, and Poland are particularly reliant on migrant workers from other EU member states or third countries.

Even though the **immigration status** of the workers (i.e. EU citizens, third-country permanent residents, holders of seasonal work permits, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants) may affect their rights, they mostly share the same conditions in the field.

Problems



Institutional Shortcomings

Working and living conditions of seasonal agricultural workers in the EU remain beyond the scope of current policies.

As such, EU rural development strategies fail to address the fundamental issue of respecting workers' rights and securing decent living conditions. This oversight constitutes a major short-coming in ensuring just and cohesive development in rural communities.



Degrading Working Conditions

Decent working conditions in the agricultural sector are undermined by many factors.

This includes:

- Work without contracts;
- Contract noncompliance;
- Health and safety violations;
- Under-developed regulatory mechanisms;
- Insufficient labour inspections.



Inadequate Living Conditions

Seasonal agricultural workers often do not have decent housing with proper kitchens and hygienic sanitation facilities.

Access to basic services (health-care, legal support, etc.) is often very limited.

Lack of public transport compounds issues of isolation.

Recommendations



Overcoming Institutional Shortcomings

1. Bring seasonal agricultural work to the fore in the Rural Pact.

Agricultural workers affiliated organisations should feature prominently in the Rural Pact's list of key actors in rural development.

2. Enhance horizontal cooperation between Local Action Groups (LAGs).

A new Rural Pact Community Group should bring together LAGs in order to improve living and working conditions in rural areas.

3. Enhance vertical cooperation between LAGs and EU policymakers.

Interactions should be strengthened to facilitate two-way feedback and cooperation on funding structures and application processes.

4. Expand the scope of existing EU funds to target agricultural workers.

Local actors often overlook EU funds that are not directly linked to agriculture or rural development but profess more social objectives. Including agricultural workers as a separate category of marginalised people entitled to such funding would allow LAGs and other stakeholders to access a larger pool of funds.



Improve Working Conditions

1. Strengthen social dialogue.

LAGs and labour organisations should promote social dialogue at the local level. Relatedly, governments should boost sectoral social dialogue within the framework of the social conditionality clause of the CAP.

2. Bolster European Union legislation to counter gang-mastering.

EU-level legislation should drive national efforts to uncover and address cases of severe exploitation.

3. Expand the capacity of labour inspectorates.

An EU Directive on inspections should enhance the capacity of national inspectorates to monitor, identify and apprehend violations of labour rights in agriculture.



Improve Living Conditions

1. Invest in quality housing for seasonal agricultural workers.

Rural projects should promote renovation of existing abandoned or unused real estate to host agricultural workers in rural areas.

2. Install workplace facilities to provide basic human necessities.

Local actors should develop basic facilities to service not only workers, but the entire local community. These include communal kitchens, showers, laundry rooms, internet access, and community rooms.

3. Strengthen access to services in remote areas.

Mobile one-stop shops provide services including legal advice, healthcare, and workplace safety campaigns. A digital tool should augment and complement these services.

4. Improve public transport.

Public transport between fields and urban centres reduces social and physical isolation and promotes community integration.

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