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BRIEF

The Shades of Green: Migrants' Contribution to EU Agriculture Context, Trends, Opportunities, Challenges

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Highlights

Despite agriculture being a strategic economic and policy domain for the European Union, rural areas in the EU suffer socio-economic marginalisation and desertification.

Immigrants currently represent a key strategic asset in tackling the lack of a workforce, problems of generational renewal in agriculture and the abandonment of rural areas.



The farming industry can absorb workforce relatively easily in comparison to other sectors, and the rural world holds the potential to accommodate important numbers of immigrants.

Problems exist, though, when it comes to the living and working conditions and the rights of rural immigrant workers, and their related socio-economic integration and stabilisation.

Efforts to improve these situations shall start from elaborating an integrated policy framework that enhances coherence between agriculture, migration and labour market domains.

The paper proposes, as well, tailored initiatives and investments as a way to contribute to CAP 2020 Reform towards a *smart, sustainable and inclusive* rural world in the EU.

Preamble

Two opposed dynamics are taking place at present: while intense flows of migrants reach Europe in search of a better life, European countryside is experiencing unprecedented levels of depopulation and abandonment. In most EU regions agriculture faces labour shortages and problems of generational renewal.

How might agriculture and migration domains articulate sustainable mutual engagements ?

What is the potential for the rural EU of the growing presence of immigrants, and what are the risks and opportunities ?

Restructuring of the Agrarian World

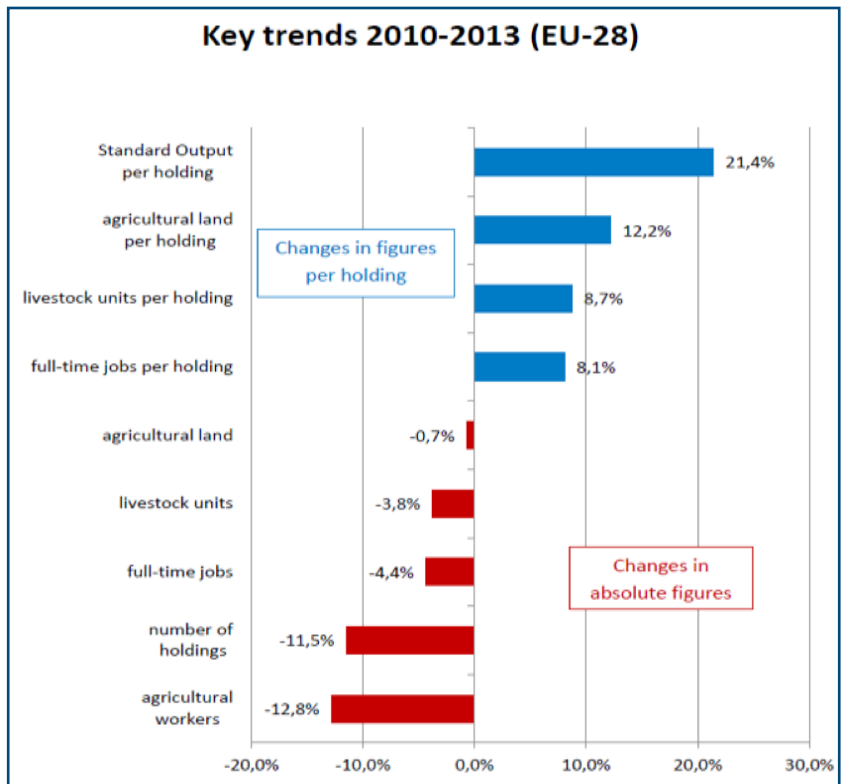
Agriculture, the primary sector, represents a key human activity that concerns the production of food and the management of natural resources – two key aspects of any society; as such it involves a number of socio-cultural and environmental externalities. Through its important contribution to EU GDP, agriculture provides the basic source

of employment and income for rural communities, which take in about 45% of EU territory.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a pillar of the European Union, and CAP's finances account for about 40% of the overall EU budget. Over time CAP has been reformed to better take into account different aspects of rural livelihoods. Despite its economic success, CAP social outcomes are less satisfying, as rural populations continue to decline and many rural communities remain socially and politically marginalised.

The agriculture restructuring that has characterised recent decades has contributed to widening inequalities between and within territories: economic, social and demographic indicators show average income in EU rural areas at only 60% of that of urban dwellers, and much lower rates of access to primary services and basic infrastructure. All these make agriculture and rural livelihoods unattractive to the young. This results in many rural areas experiencing today population decline and ageing, abandonment of remote villages, and related problems of lack of manpower and generational turnover.

Key trends affecting EU agriculture and rural livelihoods 2010-2013 (Eurostat, 2013)





The substantial influx of foreign nationals into EU agriculture has helped to counterbalance this ‘rural exodus’. Migrants have come to fill the gaps left by local populations in the rural labour markets. Today foreign workers – both legal and illegal – make up a large and increasing portion of the EU’s agricultural labour force and a relevant part of its rural population. These inflows have enabled many farms, agricultural enterprises and rural villages to weather difficult times, contributing to the resilience of EU agriculture.

Migrant labourers in agriculture have dramatically increased through the recent financial crisis, attesting to the relevance of this sector as a safe haven for precarious, migrant workforce. Evidence indicates that during the last decade a large portion of immigrants to the EU have found occupations in rural areas, as poverty and unemployment grew in urban ones. According to official data, immigrants constitute today over one-third of the salaried agricultural workforce in southern EU countries.

Recent demographic trends in the southern EU countryside
(Eurostat database)

Spain	France	Italy	Greece	
9.8	4.8	7.9	20.8	% rural on active pop. in 2008
56.4	41.9	62.2	57.2	% rural pop. older than 55 years in 2008
30.0	31.5	32.4	33.3	% rural pop. older than 65 years in 2011
19.1	n.a	19.4	17.0	% immigrants on agric. salaried workforce in 2008
24.0	n.a	37.0	> 50.0	% immigrants on agric. salaried workforce in 2013

The over-representation of migrant communities is particularly striking in certain rural areas and agricultural sectors. Territorial and ethnic reconfiguration as well as gender specialisation are taking place, with distinct communities occupying specific ecological and productive niches. There are many migrants in low-skilled, seasonal agricultural occupations, such as is typical of intensive farming in high-yielding areas. Immigrants’ presence is, though, growing, too, in high-skill sectors, such as livestock husbandry, forestry management and food processing. Whatever the domain, immigrants provide

valuable contributions in the value chains of typical, geographically branded food products that characterise EU regions.

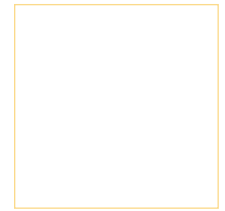
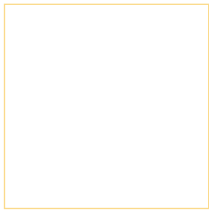
Made in Italy thanks to foreigners

Immigrants represent a structural component in ensuring the excellence of Made in Italy, in a country where agro-food represents a strategic sector and plays a critical economic role through agricultural export and the tourism industry. Typical examples include milk value chains with a significant presence of Asian labourers, horticulture activities undertaken by African seasonal workers, and eastern Europeans taking care of mountainous resource management. Most famous cheeses such as Parmesan, Fontina, Pecorino, and mozzarella benefit largely from, respectively, Punjabi, Moroccan, Romanian and Bengali manpower.

Furthermore immigrants represent a critical asset in many marginal rural territories; through their engagement in pastoral, forestry and care-giving activities the foreign workforce plays a determinant role in keeping landlocked and remote areas alive and productive. Their presence in these territories supports not only agricultural practices, but the whole socio-economic fabric, and critically contributes to maintaining the rural landscape and traditional ways of living.

Main factors that attract a migrant workforce to agriculture and rural areas include the following: a) access to food and accommodation which is often easier/cheaper in the countryside; b) demand for skills and capacities often meets those of incoming population, including direct experience in the primary sector; c) marginalisation and invisibility suit immigrants without regular papers, visa or permits. This grey zone makes agriculture a relevant ‘entry point’ for irregular migrants, and provides the setting for illegal practices and exploitation – as attested by the cases of (a handful of many): El Ejido, 2000 in Spain; Rosarno, 2010; and Ragusa, 2015, in Italy; or Manoladas, 2013, in Greece.

The conditions and the rights of immigrant agricultural workers are indeed a matter of concern. Conditions of illegality, precariousness, limited rights, scarce salary and poor working standards represent typical features of workers operating in this context. Poor and exploitative conditions are closely interrelated to difficulties in obtaining residence permits, entrepreneurial licenses and overall citizenship rights. Altogether these elements



inhibit the interests and capacities of immigrants in stabilising and upgrading in the primary sector.

From worker to entrepreneur

Mario, a Romanian shepherd, came to Italy ten years ago. Initially, he worked for about five years without a contract or insurance. After this first ‘informal’ period, he has been now working with a contract for more than three years, which enables him full rights to register as an entrepreneur and to legally own a flock. With his savings he has been able to accumulate a few animals each year, which he kept within the flock of his employer. Recently, he and his employer have been talking about jointly managing a common flock. They plan to share the costs and responsibilities, as well as the profits. With an established business, Mario will be able to bring his wife and children to Italy.

Conclusions

Migration is reshaping societies, raising questions about the integration of newcomers into patterns of sustainable development. The rural world offers relevant opportunities in this respect. Agriculture has gone through important restructuring in recent times, with relevant societal consequences. The increasing presence of wage labor indicates a decrease in family farming, and the fact that a growing portion of salaried workers are foreign nationals shows that it is often difficult to find a local workforce interested in agriculture.

Problems of workforce availability and generational renewal are widespread in the EU agrarian workforce availability and world. In this context, the contributions of immigrants to the production of food and to the management of natural resources have become a key factor of resilience for EU agriculture and for the associated rural world. Particularly in marginal settings, immigrant communities contribute to keeping rural communities productive and alive, with relevant social, ecological as well as political implications.

Immigrants are willing to accept jobs, working conditions and salaries that are rejected by the local people; they inhabit villages which would have been depopulated, and their work enables the use of lands and resources that would otherwise be abandoned. In these respects immigrants’ engagement in agriculture is less controversial than in other sectors, as competition is reduced by the limited interest of locals, many of

whom have no particular desire to work or to live in rural areas. The rights of immigrant agricultural workers are, though, a matter of concern, with cases of illegal hiring, mistreatment and other social costs. Poor living and exploitative working conditions undermine a more structural engagement and contribution of the foreign workforce to EU agriculture.

The upcoming reform of CAP in 2020 is an opportunity to consider options for facilitating the integration of newcomers in a way that offers them long-term perspectives; a young and motivated workforce is a key asset for tackling generational renewal problems and rural abandonment, towards a healthy and vital agriculture. Adequate policies and strategic investments are thus needed to ensure that rural migrations mutually benefit all stakeholders. This will carry positive implications in terms of sustainable food production, natural resource management, territorial integration and inclusive development, so to reflect the 2020 vision of a Europe that is *smart, sustainable and inclusive*.

Efforts in this direction include defining an integrated EU policy framework that enhances coherence between agriculture, migration and labour market domains. Tailored initiatives should be also conceived accordingly, including: a) the establishment of reliable platforms for managing rural market labor; b) an observatory on abandonment and transfers of agricultural lands; c) the organisation of training modules aimed at adapting newcomers’ technical skills to local conditions; d) the reform of policy and legal frameworks so as to facilitate rural immigrants’ citizenship conditions.

The Author

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