

THE NETHERLANDS

1. OVERVIEW

The first stringent Covid-19 prevention measures in the Netherlands were announced on 12 March 2020. Working from home whenever possible featured centrally in these measures, except for employees in industries considered essential to the Covid-19 response, including workers in the food supply chain. One week later, education facilities and hospitality services were closed. After a gradual decline in the number of infections in April, the preventive measures were slowly relaxed from May onwards.

2. THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM

Covid-19 prevention measures in the Netherlands and elsewhere, such as the closure of the hospitality sector, slowed down growth in exports of key agricultural products during the first quarter of the year. Floricultural exports dropped by 35 per cent in April compared to the previous year.³⁶ Between January and March, demand for meat and fruit from other EU countries declined, while sales to non-EU countries increased.³⁷

The drop in demand was partially compensated for by initiatives to shorten the agri-food chain between growers and consumers. At the same time, an increase in consumer demand for healthy food further fuelled the rise in organic food sales. In April, the Dutch consumer price index for food, beverages and tobacco signalled relatively high inflation.³⁸

3. THE CONSEQUENCES FOR WORKERS

The employment and health risks faced by Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrant workers in Dutch agriculture as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic are severe.

To address labour shortages in selected sectors as a result of the lockdown, in early April workers from Romania and Hungary were flown in, largely for employment in the asparagus and strawberry harvest. Physical distancing rules were ignored on these flights. In sectors with peaking seasonal labour demand, working hours often increased, up to 14 hours a day in extreme cases.³⁹

The slump in demand in other sectors further worsened migrant farmworkers' employment conditions and income insecurity. A survey among employment agency workers showed that at the beginning of April about half of them – especially women, older workers and those with low education and incomes – had little or no work anymore. Half of those still employed had experienced wage cuts.⁴⁰ For CEE migrants who have lost their jobs, related problems have been aggravated by travel restrictions to Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, resulting in an increased number of homeless migrants.

Cracks in CEE migrants' access to healthcare have widened during the pandemic. Between March and April, surplus mortality was about 50 per cent higher among migrants from the Western hemisphere,⁴¹ including CEE countries, compared to a 38 per cent rise among the native population.⁴²

The bulk of employment agency workers do not benefit from preventive measures against Covid-19 contagion provided by their employers.⁴³ Disinfection is lacking in workers' housing, where compliance with social distancing measures also seems almost impossible.⁴⁴ As a consequence, compared to 2019, the support organisation FairWork received four times as many complaints between mid-March and mid-April – mostly from CEE nationals.⁴⁵ This rise is likely to underestimate the increase in the risks that workers face, given that they are often afraid to report a lack of protective measures due to a fear of dismissal, which commonly also entails the loss of health insurance.

The meat processing industry, followed by the fruit sector, turned out to be epicentres of Covid-19 infections. Several affected meat plants were temporarily closed as a result. Despite a significant number of infected employees, the country's largest meat processing plant was kept open on the basis of an agreement with the public health service, justified by the need to avoid bottlenecks in meat supply.⁴⁶

4. GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THE DEMAND FOR SEASONAL LABOUR AND THE AGRI-FOOD CRISIS

The Dutch government took a *laissez-faire* stance with regard to bottlenecks in seasonal labour demand in agriculture while directly supporting selected groups of growers. While some municipalities fined employers for violations of Covid-19 prevention measures, in Westland, a global hub of greenhouse horticulture, the municipality announced that, in order to guarantee food security, controlling the transportation conditions for workers offered by employment agencies was not a priority.

Following a temporary emergency scheme for job retention, from April companies that suffered a loss of revenue could apply for up to 90 per cent wage cost compensation. This also included the wages of employees with flexible contracts. In addition, the government provided subsidies totalling €650

million to growers of flowers, potatoes and other food crops that were hit hardest by Covid-19. Requests for environmental conditionalities for these subsidies were rejected by the government.

In May, the social affairs and employment ministry (SZW) established a Migrant Workers Protection Taskforce to address accommodation, working conditions, transport, health and border issues. Given the high number of infections in the meat industry, in June the Dutch Labour Inspectorate began a project on labour market fraud and occupational health and safety in this sector.

5. INITIATIVES BY FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

Reacting to the Covid-19 emergency, farmers' organisations and employment agencies have developed initiatives both to guarantee adequate employment levels and to protect the health of workers.

Sectors which saw a drop in consumer demand experienced large labour surpluses, compared to a lack of a skilled workforce in others. The Corona Crisis Personnel Platform is a joint initiative by different employer organisations and trade unions FNV and CNV,⁴⁷ while "Help us to harvest" was initiated by the largest employers' association, the Netherlands Agricultural and Horticultural Association (LTO), with employment agency Nedflex.⁴⁸ A few days after the introduction of the platforms, a thousand job seekers had already registered, mainly Dutch nationals such as students, hospitality and travel agency workers, who began work in the seasonal harvest. In May, the minister of agriculture, nature and food quality declared that there was no labour shortage.⁴⁹

The Dutch Federation of Private Employment Agencies (ABU) and LTO joined forces with trade unions to formulate protocols for safe working conditions in the agricultural sector.⁵⁰ Criticising the first advice by the Migrant Workers Protection Taskforce to accommodate one worker per room and to apply physical distancing during transport,

ABU argued that its own protocol providing for a maximum of two workers sharing rooms and shared transport for workers living in the same household offered an alternative.⁵¹

6. INITIATIVES BY TRADE UNIONS, WORKERS, AND OTHER CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS

In a letter to parliament, NGOs FairWork and CoMensha and trade unions FNV and CNV highlighted how the ongoing pandemic aggravates migrants' working conditions. They demanded effective protection of migrants at work, during transport and in their housing by the ministry of social affairs, also to avoid risks to public health at large and specific the food supply.⁵² In addition, FNV emphasised the need to reduce migrant workers'

dependency on their employers by separating employment and housing contracts.⁵³ In addition, the abovementioned organisations and CEE migrant groups offer multi-lingual platforms and helplines to inform migrant workers about their rights and about grievance procedures.

The CNV criticised the large number of employment losses among agency workers despite the fact that companies received billions in wage subsidies to stabilise employment.⁵⁴ In a similar move, NGOs advocating for environmental justice, including Greenpeace and Milieudefensie, demanded that pandemic-related public support for companies be made conditional on meeting specific sustainability goals. In parallel, civil society groups such as the Short Chain and Local Food Task Force in The Hague seek to shorten agri-food chains and to stimulate sustainable production.