


From panic to business as usual: What coronavirus has revealed about migrant labour, agri-food systems and industrial relations in the Nordic countries

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Abstract

This article focuses on migrant labour in Nordic agriculture, wild berry picking and food processing. The starting point is the fear of a food crisis at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic (2020) because of the absence of migrant workers. The question was raised early in the pandemic if food systems in the Global North are vulnerable due to dependence on precarious migrant workers. In the light of this question, we assess the reactions of farmers and different actors in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden to what looked like an unfolding food crisis. In many ways, the reactions in the Nordic countries were similar to each other, and to broader reactions in the Global North, and we follow these reactions as they relate to migrant workers from an initial panic to a return to business as usual despite the continuation of the pandemic. In the end, 2020 proved to be an excellent year for Nordic food production in part because migrant workers were able to come. We discuss

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reasons why the Nordic countries did not face disruptions during the pandemic, map out patterns of labour precarity and segmentation for migrant labour in agriculture and food production in the Nordic countries and propose questions for further research.

KEYWORDS

agriculture, coronavirus, food processing, migrant labour, Nordic countries, precarity, wild berry picking

INTRODUCTION

The early months of the coronavirus pandemic (in 2020) brought unprecedented attention to migrant labour in different parts of the agri-food system in the Global North with unusually widespread and frank discussion in the mass media. As Molinero-Gerbeau (2021) writes, however, the issues discussed in the media were not new—what was unusual was how much public attention migrant workers in agriculture received due to the pandemic. This attention was prompted by fears that border closures would prevent migrant labourers from showing up at their jobs in different parts of the agri-food system thereby endangering the harvesting and production of food. With concerns about food security, governments in the Global North declared migrant labourers to be essential workers and quickly found ways to make sure that they would be able to enter the countries where they were supposed to work. While there were still coronavirus-related disruptions to food production in Europe and the US, in many cases involving migrant labour, the dominant mood, at least in Europe, is that a potential food crisis was successfully averted.

While this period of panic was fleeting, the bright 'spotlight' (Ploeg, 2020) it shined on food production in Europe and the US and the way that things quickly returned to 'normal', we argue, is instructive for understanding, first, how migrant labour is treated in agriculture and other rural industries today, and second, the role and significance of migrant labour in these branches. One main question here is if agri-food systems are dependent on migrant workers? Third, during this brief period, there was discussion on if and how the pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in agri-food systems, vulnerabilities that in many cases could be directly linked to poor and unsanitary working conditions (Clapp & Moseley, 2020). Put differently, the pandemic briefly raised the question of the precarity of workers as a vulnerability for the agri-food system in general.

The aim of this article is to explore these three questions—(1) the treatment of migrant labour, (2) their role and significance and (3) connections between precarity and agri-food system vulnerability—with respect to Nordic agri-food systems and as revealed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Importantly, we note differences and similarities between the Nordic countries, and we examine these questions against the backdrop of a shift from panic to business as usual, which was a common storyline not only for the Nordic countries, but indeed for many countries in the Global North, though again with important differences and nuances. While we present an empirical analysis in this article, we want to stress that our article is exploratory in nature and intended to raise questions for further research rather than point to hard conclusions. Keeping the exploratory nature of this research in mind, our main arguments are that, first, the pandemic revealed differential treatment both between different groups of migrants and between native workers and

migrant workers. Second, the role and significance of migrant labour remain somewhat ambiguous, in part because we still do not know how many migrant workers come to the Nordic countries, but also because 2020—the first pandemic year—proved to be, on balance, a good year in terms of production for Nordic agri-food systems. Finally, looking specifically at meat production, we make the argument that less precarious work conditions might have helped slaughterhouses in the Nordic countries avoid production disruptions seen elsewhere.

In this article, we are interested in migrant workers who work in agriculture, wild berry picking and food processing. These rural industries all contribute to food production, which is the focus here. Harvested wild berries are only partially used as food, but we include it here because wild berry picking is a prominent and relatively well-studied example of work migration in the Nordic countries that overlaps with work migration to the Nordic countries for farming¹ and helps put other kinds of migrant labour to other sectors in agriculture or in food processing in perspective. The combination of agriculture, wild berry picking and food processing involves migrants from different countries working for different kinds of employers, for example, large multinational corporations, smaller firms linked in complex transnational supply chains or farmers.

While there has been research on migrant labour in the rural industries of interest for us in the Nordic countries, we still lack trans-Nordic treatments of migrant labour in these branches and the differences and similarities depending on the country or branch. Highlighting these aspects, and situating them in a Global North context, is an important contribution of this article and helps to understand migrant workers' situation in the Nordic countries.

After this introduction, the second and third sections discuss relevant theoretical perspectives and review earlier research on migrant labour in the Nordic countries. The fourth section lays out our approach, and the fifth section describes how 2020 played out for migrant workers in the relevant branches in the different Nordic countries. The final section contains a concluding discussion.

Precarity and food agri-food systems in the Global North

Coronavirus quickly became a major crisis for agri-food systems around the world (Clapp & Moseley, 2020; Ploeg, 2020). While we now know that the events motivating the fears proved to be transitory, the pandemic was a stress test, and the view of the stress test in the early days of the pandemic was that these systems could fail. One of the main feared vulnerabilities was connected to migrant workers and can be broken down into two overlapping dimensions: a dependence of agri-food systems on migrant and/or temporary workers and the precarity of these workers. Dependence reflects the demand for migrant workers for jobs that would otherwise be difficult to fill, often because of low-pay or bad working conditions. This dependence on low-paid, temporary labour has intensified in many countries of the Global North in recent decades as a result of economic pressures on farms connected to deepening neo-liberal globalisation (Corrado et al., 2016; Palumbo, 2022). For some branches, this dependency is seasonal in character. While the growing season defines important parameters of seasonality, the seasonality of labour migration is further inflected by the demands of industrialised farming under conditions of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, where farms today need what Garrapa (2016) calls 'just-in-time' workers (see also Milkman, 2020). This is particularly the case for horticulture, where, even if greenhouses mitigate the seasonality to a certain degree, the work—at least in the Nordic countries—is still predominantly performed from mid-spring to late summer or early autumn (wild berry picking

is similarly seasonal in character). The dependence of other agri-food branches on migrants is less seasonal in character, for example, slaughterhouses and dairy farming. In spring 2020, there was a concern that closed borders would make it impossible for migrant workers to come to many countries in the Global North, leading to labour shortages, with the immediate concern being horticulture, since workers were supposed to be arriving soon after the outbreak of the pandemic.

The question of agri-food system vulnerability arising from precarity is closely related. The argument from Clapp and Moseley is that precarious work (defined below) contributes to production difficulties or interruptions. This became evident during the pandemic in some countries in relation to slaughterhouses and horticulture, where workers, many of whom were migrant labourers, were exposed to increased risk for coronavirus infection (Saitone et al., 2021) because they travelled, worked and lived under crowded conditions that increased the risk for contracting the disease. Outbreaks due to these issues in slaughterhouses in the US and Germany not only led to the increased spread of coronavirus in the immediate area (Ban et al., 2022; Saitone et al., 2021),² but they also led to production disruptions in both countries.³ The US eventually had to allow meat imports from South America to satisfy the demand for meat products in 2020 (Ermgassen, 2021).⁴ In theoretical terms, what happened in the spring of 2020 was that the vulnerability of precarious workers was briefly exposed as a larger vulnerability of the whole food system and society as a whole (Ban et al., 2022; Bisoffi et al., 2021; Clapp & Moseley, 2020). Ironically, the fact that many of these jobs were deemed 'essential', that is, the efforts to rhetorically raise the status of these jobs during the pandemic, instead exacerbated the precarity of the workers as they were forced to work and congregate in conditions that were conducive to the spread of the virus (Reid et al., 2021).

While on the one hand, the use of the word precarious as a descriptor of many of the jobs that migrants take in the Global North is indisputable, the broader discussion and uses of precarity as a concept are 'complex' and based on 'different understandings of what is being described' (Valestrand, 2021, p. 2). For the present analysis, we will make reference to two schools of thought on precarity, one focusing on 'precarious work' and the other taking a broader ontological perspective, extending 'precarity' beyond the work relation. Precarious work relations involve, according to Kalleberg (2018, p. 29): '(1) insecurity and uncertainty associated with the jobs; (2) limited economic and social benefits and (3) lack of legal protections'. On the surface, this is about bad working conditions—low salary, 'high risk of job loss' and 'unpredictability on the job' (Ibid, p. 15), and a lack of legal and other protections surrounding the work situation. Separately, Kalleberg points out that the rise of precarious work relations reflects a decline in the so-called standard employment relation (SER), itself a result of 'a swing in power relations from labour to capital' (Ibid, pp. 13–14), which gives employers greater freedom to 'shift' (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 8) risk to employees in the form of the aspects mentioned above.

The ontological perspective speaks of 'precarity' as a broader condition, arising out of the same political-economic forces but extending beyond the work relation to encompass 'social risk and fragmented life situations, which provide no security, protection or predictability' (Schierup & Jørgensen, 2016, p. 948). Precarity is seen as increasing for everyone, but migrant workers remain (Ibid, p. 949) 'the quintessential incarnation of precarity'. This is broadly in line with Gertel and Simpel who discuss how basic human security is fracturing and becoming more 'individualised', requiring ever greater flexibility on the part of people in general but seasonal farm workers in particular.

Combining these two framings of precarity results in theoretically informed questions around risk and uncertainty: What risks are involved at work, and how is the risk distributed between

employer and employee? In what way does the employer or society mitigate the risks? In what way can the broader life situation of migrants be characterised by uncertainty, and does the work situation aggravate that uncertainty or ameliorate it?

Another question is why do migrant workers accept the risks? Dual labour market theory argues that there is a 'core' of jobs that can be characterised by the SER and an 'atypical' segment (Deakin, 2013) of undesirable jobs characterised in varying degrees by physical unpleasantness, low status and the criteria (above) that Kalleberg uses to define precarious work. These undesirable jobs have historically been taken by women, minority groups and, as Piore (1979) described in great detail, migrants. There is often a dynamic that the very presence of many migrants in a job category confers low status; as migrants take certain kinds of jobs, natives leave these jobs. The reasons migrants take jobs at the bottom of the social hierarchy are ascribed to a 'dual frame of reference' (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003), that is, the money that migrants earn in these undesirable jobs is seen as attractive from a homeland perspective.

Critics of dual market labour theory argue that it risks reinforcing a false dichotomy between standard and non-standard work arrangements, masking what is actually a considerable variety of conditions in different labour markets (Choonara, 2019; Valestrand, 2021). We keep this objection in mind, but because dual market theory foregrounds the fact that the jobs that migrants fill have for a number of reasons become undesirable for the native population and explains why migrants take undesirable jobs, we find it relevant for Nordic circumstances. The theoretical task, as we see it, is to map out how different labour markets with migrant workers look in terms of work conditions and degree of precarity, as defined above, keeping in mind the above critique that the boundary between the SER and 'atypical' jobs can be porous and that labour market segmentation is an ongoing process.

Nordic labor markets for migrant workers

We can see the difficulty of discerning differences between the SER and 'atypical' jobs if we take the example of slaughterhouses in the Nordic countries. It is hard to hire natives for these jobs, not because the salary and job protections are lacking, but because the job is—as a manager from the Swedish slaughterhouse industry said to the media—'bloody' and perceived as unpleasant (Levinson, 2020). For this reason, there are many migrant workers in Nordic slaughterhouses. Research has shown however that slaughterhouses in Denmark 'avoid tendencies towards segmentation and precarious working conditions' (Refslund & Wagner, 2018, p. 67) because migrants are hired directly by the company and work side by side with their Danish colleagues in the same working conditions. These relatively benign working conditions are attributed by Refslund and Wagner to the strength of unions in Denmark. The situation for migrant workers in Norwegian fish processing is similar in some regards, both with respect to wages and union representation, though there are certainly also inequalities (Slettebak & Rye, 2022). Meanwhile, according to Refslund and Wagner, migrants working in German slaughterhouses were at this time⁵ 'posted' from other countries—meaning that the relevant labour standards are the sending country. Posted workers in German slaughterhouses earned less money than their Danish counterparts (even in the same company), struggled to achieve union representation and faced more precariousness than their counterparts in Denmark (see also Ban et al., 2022). This example reveals: (1) not all migrants are consigned to non-SER 'atypical' work; and (2) saying that a job is undesirable for whatever reason is not the same thing as saying it is precarious, though there often is overlap.

There are other cases where people migrate to the Nordic countries for jobs that have a modicum of protections and amenities, in terms of salaries and other employment conditions, as laid out in collective bargaining agreements and national legislation. In such cases, as outlined below, we can provisionally say that the work may be tough or bad and at the bottom of the Nordic salary scale, but that some of the serious precarious aspects have been mitigated. Rye describes how the Norwegian farmers' association and the relevant trade unions have come together and partially succeeded in developing policies to ameliorate precarious work conditions among farm migrants in that country (2017)—like Refslund and Wagner (2018) showing the importance of institutions and, especially trade unions, for shaping migrant worker experiences. With an analysis focused at the farm level, Stenbacka (2019) described a moral economy of care regulating and providing for relatively benign employment conditions, based on personal relationships between migrant workers and farmers in the Uppsala region of Sweden. It is important to keep in mind that these jobs still involve some precariousness since, following the definition above, career advancement and/or social mobility are difficult for migrant workers even in these relatively 'good' jobs (see Slettebak & Rye, 2022). Also, the physical nature of some of these 'good' jobs can involve a degree of risk for wear and tear injuries (Biering et al., 2017).

There are of course cases where Nordic employers put undue hardship and risk on migrant workers resulting in precarious work. As Refslund and Thörnquist argue (2016), precarious work relations are hard to mitigate in agriculture and wild berry picking because, as opposed to slaughterhouses, the work is spread out geographically, making it difficult for the unions and authorities to monitor poor working conditions. Moreover, spending a lot of time at relatively spread out or isolated farms can contribute to 'structural disempowerment' of migrant workers, hindering, for example, integration with Nordic society (Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010; see also Scott & Visser, 2022). Migrants are dependent in such situations on the moral sensibility of farmers, which, as noted above, can sometimes be satisfactory but in some cases is not. An additional potential difficulty in rectifying poor working conditions concerns 'posted' workers—such as many wild berry pickers from Thailand—as the relevant legal jurisdiction for enforcement of labour standards is not in the Nordic countries (Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018; Ban et al., 2022).

Thus, there is a diversity of different conditions and degrees of protection in labour markets dominated by migrants in the Nordic countries. The legal particularities of migration status are certainly important (Iossa & Selberg, 2022) for defining segmentation patterns in the Nordic countries, while other conditions—the moral sensibility of the farmer, the relative isolation of workers in the countryside, and the strength of unions—also shape the relative degree of precarity. It is important to keep in mind that a hard distinction between 'core' and 'atypical' jobs can obscure situations where undesirable jobs, such as in Nordic slaughterhouses, nevertheless approximate the SER.

Method and approach

This article grew out of a workshop in 2021 discussing the impact of coronavirus on migrant labour in agriculture, involving participants with over 10 years of experience researching these questions in Nordic contexts. During and following this workshop, the participants contributed with their expert assessments, insights into specific events and overview of the situation in each country during the course of the pandemic. Empirically, our analysis is also supported by a few key references to debates and interventions from national media and 26 interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to corroborate and nuance pandemic discussions and arguments that were

showcased in media reports. Due to pandemic restrictions, most of these interviews were done either online (Zoom or Teams) or via telephone. We did two interviews with union officials in Denmark and one with an expert on the wild berry industry in Finland. In Norway, we did three interviews with farmers and one with a representative from the national farm union. In Sweden, we did six interviews with union officials, seven with farmers (including farm managers), one with a manager at a small slaughterhouse, one with a representative from the Swedish farming federation, one with two managers from the Swedish farm exchange programme, one with a regional epidemiologist, one with a representative from the Thai embassy and one interview with an expert on the wild berry industry.

Our approach has been exploratory in nature and intended to raise questions for more systematic, future empirical research rather than point to hard conclusions. In short, we have prioritised taking stock based on the material we could jointly source in a timely fashion over a more systematic and rigorous empirical approach. Our selection and interpretation of interviews, media interventions and events emerged from discussions within the group of authors and also from advice and comments from key informants in the respective Nordic countries. Our aim is to provide a first broad overview of how the situation with respect to migrant labour in agriculture in the Nordic countries unfolded during the pandemic and sketch out questions for further more systematic comparative research on this important but often neglected topic.

Coronavirus and migrant agricultural labour in the Nordic countries

Coronavirus highlights numbers of migrants and working conditions

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was considerable concern that migrant workers would not be able to come to the Nordic countries due to the border closures. It was during this initial period that the topic of migrant workers received widespread attention in the mass media in the Nordic countries as indeed in the rest of the Global North. There was a stream of headlines such as (Finland) 'A major lack of labour threatens agriculture and soon it will show in the price of food' (Salmela, 2020); (Norway) 'Farmers consider cancelling strawberry production' (Fosse, 2020); (Sweden) 'A summer without strawberries' (Bergquist, 2020). While most of the concern was about the immediate period, there was speculation in the spring of 2020 that this crisis would affect food production more generally. For example, the head of the Swedish farm federation (LRF) was quoted in the media saying (TT, 2020): 'The Corona-crisis is leading to a discussion about food security in Sweden and food system vulnerability. I think that we're going to look at these jobs [i.e. jobs filled by migrant workers] differently in the future'.

Part of the initial focus of media attention at this early juncture concerned numbers, that is, how many migrant workers come to the different Nordic countries in a normal year, and what the shortfall of this expected number might be during the pandemic. Some of this was informed guesswork as in Sweden where the Farmer Federation made an estimate of the number of migrant workers in agriculture based on official statistics. In sifting through the estimates and official statistics from the four countries, emphasising workers in farming (especially, but not only horticulture) and wild berry picking, we arrive at a total figure of ~88,600 migrants coming to the Nordic countries in a pre-pandemic 'normal' year.⁶ Given the different sources, and the fact that it is in part based on estimates (see note 6), this figure must be seen as provisional, but it is almost certainly an undercount, as it does not include migrant workers in food processing. Regardless of the quality of the estimations, the attention to numbers in the debate in all the studied countries

clearly indicates the perceived significance of the migrant labour force to food production and that the reliance on hired migrants is increasing, both in the Nordic countries and globally (Rye et al., 2018).

In connection with these numbers, numerous farmers and farmer organisations argued that the migrant workers were necessary, that is, that local residents are not appropriate for the physically demanding tasks common to horticulture in particular and farming in general. As a strawberry farmer in Sweden said to Swedish public radio (Sveriges Radio, 2020) in March 2020: ‘people [meaning natives] can’t cope’. This is in part an argument that migrant labourers are both willing to undertake physically demanding jobs and that they have a better work ethic. This is a discourse that has been identified before the pandemic, both within rural industries (for an overview see Scott & Rye, 2021) and in other low-waged industries, showing how employers establish ‘hiring queues’ that rank ethnic groups based on their assumed qualities (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003, p. 8), including willingness to work tough jobs.

There was also another argument motivating the hiring of migrant workers: that the nature of the work is skilled, requiring workers who know the routines of the farm (TT, 2020) and can work efficiently no matter the weather (Borgström, 2020). These are not ‘simple jobs’ as one informant, a farmer in southern Sweden stated (interview with a Swedish farmer in March 2021). Unemployed residents who are directed to farm work as part of an unemployment programme are not so motivated, said the same informant, which was a sentiment also expressed by farmers to the media (Dahlman, 2020). Along these lines, a Norwegian farmer told a colourful story about a furloughed Norwegian couple arriving late on the first day and quitting the second day due to exhaustion from the previous day’s work (interview with a Norwegian farmer in June 2020). Meanwhile, ‘those who come from other countries, they see only one thing, they see the money that they and their families can live on for the rest of the year’ (interview with a Swedish farmer in March 2021).

Wages for migrant workers and the role of unions in wage-setting

In many of the same media reports where farmers emphasise the importance of hard-working, skilled migrants, another factor was raised—wages—that complicates the farmer arguments presented in the preceding section. LRF argued that the wage level cannot be the reason why locals and residents do not want these jobs ‘because’, as the chairman argued, ‘we pay union rates’ (TT, 2020). The question then is: what is meant by ‘union rates’, and, more generally, how are wages determined for migrant workers in the Nordic countries? Nordic countries do not have minimum wages unlike many other countries in the Global North. Instead, salary scales are negotiated every several years between unions and employers’ organisations typically on a sectoral basis. The current (2022) minimum union-agreed wages for horticulture are presented in Table 1 for the Nordic countries, translated into euro (where necessary).

The collective bargaining agreements contain a salary scale based on a variety of factors, including the age of the worker and degree of experience. The hourly wages presented in Table 1 are the absolute minimum that are allowed for adults in the respective collective bargaining agreements. The actual wages for migrant workers may be higher or lower (as we illustrate below).

There are several questions that arise from the union-agreed minimum wage rates. First, how prevalent are these agreed wages? The agreements bind employers who have signed the agreement, regardless if their workers are in the relevant union or not. However, in case of a dispute, a worker can be helped by the union only if they are members. Most migrant workers are not members of the relevant union in the Nordic countries. The number of farmers, as employers,

TABLE 1 Minimum collective bargaining wage rates in the Nordic countries for horticulture. Exchange rates are current as of April 2022. Sources are the relevant collective bargaining agreements for horticulture in the four countries under review here (GLS-A/3F, 2021; Kommunal/Gröna Arbetsgivare, 2021; NHO/LO, n.d.; Teollisuusliitto, 2022).

Country	Minimum hourly union-agreed wage for horticulture in local currency and euro
Denmark	150 Dk ~ €20
Finland	€9 (Finland is the only Nordic country that uses the euro)
Norway	129 NOK ~ €13
Sweden	122 SEK ~ €12

that have signed collective bargaining agreements varies between the Nordic countries. It can be as high as two-thirds—as one representative from the relevant union in Sweden said speaking of a particular area in Sweden⁷ (interview with Swedish union representative in January 2022)—but it is likely lower in the other Nordic countries. One question is if farms or businesses that have not signed the collective bargaining agreement offer similar terms and conditions to their workers. According to a union representative in Sweden, the collective bargaining agreement most likely has a ‘normative’ effect (interview with Swedish union representative in April 2022). However, the extent of this effect on migrant worker wages in the sectors of the economy that we are interested in (cf. Friberg & Eldring, 2013) is uncertain with one important exception (see next paragraph). To better protect migrant workers, the collective bargaining wage rate in rural industries has (uniquely in the Nordic countries) been formalised in Norway. Through the ‘general application of collective agreements (GACA)’, the agreed wage rate between the industry and the unions applies to all workers (in these industries) in Norway, that is, not just union members (Rye, 2017).

In a comprehensive report Hedberg et al. (2019) showed that roughly one-third of Thai wild berry pickers do not earn the minimum collective bargaining rate in Sweden despite the fact that many of the companies have signed the collective bargaining agreement (note that in Sweden, wild berry picking is covered by a separate collective agreement, i.e., not the agreement in Table 1). This is due to a mix of reasons including deceitful conduct of some companies and wild berry pickers’ own preference for piece rates, in the hope that piece rates can lead to higher returns. Piece rates are actually allowed in most Nordic collective bargaining agreements related to agriculture or rural industries, and are common, but should either correspond to or exceed (Finland) the union agreed wage over a season, a condition that is clearly not always satisfied.

No such detailed overview exists yet for farming, but according to interviewed farmers in southern Sweden over the past two years, migrant workers are receiving a wage either over or close to the minimum collective bargaining rate. We say this only to confirm that some migrant workers are receiving the minimum agreed wage or greater, though we note that farmers underpaying the agreed wage level may not admit it or even agree to an interview. In any case, it is also important to note that there have been reports showing that wages below the union rate are a recurring problem. Spanger and Hvalkof (2020) reported on this for Denmark, and while the GACA formalisation reforms in Norway have led to improvements, the Norwegian Work Life Directorate continuously finds violations of labour regulations relating to migrant workers, including wage standards (Arbeidstilsynet, 2020). While a Swedish union official stated that every year they receive a few (*enstaka*) complaints from ‘guest workers’, mainly about unpaid or low wages, this respondent also stated that they know there are more cases out there. Migrant workers can be afraid, the respondent said, because they can be ‘black-listed’ if a complaint is registered with the

union, and the farmer finds out about it (interview with Swedish union representative, January 2022). Summing up, we have evidence that migrant workers in farming receive wages both above and below the agreed minimum wage rate, but we lack a systematic overview from a Nordic and European perspective.

There is a union-approved exception to the collective bargaining rate that exists in Sweden and Denmark. In these countries, interns are allowed to come every year from ‘third countries’ (i.e., outside the EU) to work in horticulture or livestock farming. Roughly 400 interns come to Sweden every year, while 2000 go to Denmark, and the majority—at least pre-pandemic—are from Ukraine. In Sweden, the interns earn half of the minimum collective bargaining rate for the first 6 months, which increases to 70% of the collective bargaining rate for the next 6 months, and finally aligns with the collective bargaining rate for the final 6 months (interview with managers of internship program in Sweden, May 2021). The basis for the wage exception is that formally the interns enter Sweden or Denmark as part of an educational exchange. However, as an interview with a Swedish farmer (April 2021) who has started relatively recently to take in interns from the Swedish exchange programme made clear, the interns do critical work on the farm. In the specific case of the interviewed farmer, the fact that several interns did not come as planned from Ukraine during the pandemic caused some operational difficulties (interview with a farmer in Sweden, April 2021). An interviewed union representative within agriculture in Denmark (March 2022) was critical about this arrangement, arguing that most interns come for work purposes and not education and that this situation needs to be addressed. A similar exchange programme exists in Norway (Atlantis program), but it is less extensive and not seen as controversial.

There is an important intra-Nordic difference to note here. Most of Finland’s migrant workers are third-country nationals, the largest part of which in recent years have come from Ukraine. Most of these migrant labourers work in Finnish horticulture. Meanwhile, a mix of EU and third-country migrants come to the other Nordic countries under study here, though studies indicate that EU labour migrants dominate in Norway and Denmark (Friberg & Erdland, 2013; Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018), and they are also significant in Sweden. As presented in Table 1, Finland also has the lowest agreed minimum salary (according to collective bargaining rates), roughly half of the allowable rate in Denmark. We have not, as mentioned, systematically investigated actual wage levels, but it is possible that these minimum wages reflect actual wage differences between the Nordic countries, meaning that actual wages for migrant workers in Finland are lower than the other Nordic countries.

A final important note here is that, as desperation increased in the early months of the pandemic with no apparent solution in sight to projected labour shortfalls, there was, despite the misgivings noted above, discussion of hiring unemployed natives for these jobs in the Nordic countries. In contrast to the statement above that the low wages cannot be the reason why natives do not take jobs in these sectors, it was either discussed or agreed to offer a state-funded salary supplement in order to raise the wages to a level that would be more acceptable to unemployed natives. Norway actually offered salary supplements (Rye, 2020).⁸ The LRF and others proposed salary supplements to entice native workers (for these news reports, see Ådahl et al., 2020; Nyheter Ekot, 2020), but discussion on this matter died down when it became clear that borders would be opened for migrant labourers. There was a similar discussion in Finland, with proposals from unions and employer organisations for various measures, including supplementing salaries with continued unemployment benefits for Finnish residents taking work in farming. It was pointed out in the press (Laine, 2020) that employment contracts with migrant workers had been made well before the coronavirus restrictions. If local (Finnish residents) had been hired, the farmers were afraid that they would have had to pay twice as much for the same harvest, as the

Ukrainians work so much faster. Only in Denmark was there no discussion of supplementing salaries to entice natives into agricultural jobs.

Difficulties encountered by migrant workers during the pandemic

In May 2020, the decision was taken to open borders within the EU for ‘essential’ workers and to facilitate travel for so-called ‘third-country’ migrants, that is, migrants originating from outside the EU (Norway, not an EU member, opened its borders to migrant workers at roughly the same time). While in many respects, this opening of the borders ‘solved’ the problem of food production allowing enough migrant workers to come to the Nordic countries so that there would be—as we will see below—no adverse effect on Nordic food production, we can say that this is when the problems began for migrant workers. The opening of the borders for ‘essential’ workers did not mean that it was easy for migrants to come to the Nordic countries. This could be more or less difficult depending on the distance from the home country to the Nordic countries and whether or not the migrants were travelling inside the EU or had to cross a Schengen border.

Several Swedish farmers reported that their Polish workers coming to Sweden did not appear to face many difficulties (interviews with Swedish farmers in January and March 2021). Workers either flew or took a direct ferry from Poland to Sweden. One respondent in southern Sweden said that his workers even went back and forth between Poland and Sweden during the growing season in 2020. This sometimes resulted in them getting stuck in Poland due to Poland’s stricter quarantine rules, but most of them were able to find their way back. At the same time, Poland closed its borders for traffic due to the coronavirus, as did Germany. This meant that migrants from other countries had to scramble to find travel routes to the Nordic areas. The main travel possibility was flying, and according to news reports, this could result in crowded conditions at different airports—this occurred, for example, in Ukraine and Romania—and crowded flights. The simple act of coming to the Nordic countries entailed the necessity of congregating in a manner that meant a heightened risk for coronavirus infection (Salyga, 2020).

Travelling to the Nordic countries could actually be easier for Thai berry pickers than for EU migrants who had to find new ways to come to the Nordic countries (Hedberg, 2022). It was still possible for Thai workers to take direct flights to the Nordic countries during the pandemic, which is how they would usually travel. Still, travel restrictions from the Thai side resulted in significant uncertainty and delay about whether the berry pickers would be able to travel to Sweden and Finland. The travel restrictions were removed, after lobbying from Swedish and Finnish berry companies, though various challenges remained. For example, Thai berry pickers in Sweden faced problems with return testing due to a lack of capacity in Sweden at that time (2020) for PCR (Polymerase chain reaction) tests. The Swedish companies recruiting Thai berry pickers were required to pay a 1000 euro fee per worker to the Thai government. Also, the Finnish and Swedish firms were required to pay the testing and other fees for Thai workers. However, there were concerns that these fees were actually being passed on, at least partially, to workers through reduced compensation for berries (Hedberg, 2022). The guaranteed minimum wage for Thai berry pickers in Finland was reduced by agreement from 3000 to 2200 euro because the season was shortened (YLE News, 2020).

Finland experienced unique problems in the Nordic context, as it relies on third-country nationals who all, per definition, need a work permit. Moreover, these third-country workers come predominantly from one country—Ukraine—and are concentrated in horticulture, meaning the lack of workers could significantly affect the supply of vegetables and fruit in Finland. Because

of these special conditions, there were diplomatic discussions between the two countries, with Finland calling on Ukraine to expedite the travel of migrant workers to Finland. Ukraine initially resisted these calls, and there was a brief international dispute. Ukraine declared that it wanted to prioritise help for stranded Ukrainians abroad, helping them to return to Ukraine, but there was a deeper issue at stake for Ukraine. Ukraine wants to discourage the practice of Ukrainians migrating out of Ukraine for work, arguing, as the Ukrainian Prime Minister said to the media (Hyde, 2020) in May 2020 'there is plenty of work in Ukraine too'. Ukraine itself is dependent on migrant work as 10% of its (pre-war) GDP is from remittances from migrant workers, and it wants to reduce this dependence (Ibid). Ukraine eventually relented and allowed charter flights to Finland of migrant workers, claiming (Bisoffi et al., 2021; Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2020) to have negotiated better conditions for Ukrainian migrant workers in Finland.

How disease outbreaks were dealt with

In 2020, there was only one disease outbreak that we know of that had any effect, albeit transient, on food production in the Nordic countries. We are referring to the Danish Crown slaughterhouse in Ringsted, Denmark, where an outbreak in August 2020 resulted in 142 workers testing positive and 800 workers being asked to stay at home until the outbreak was contained (EFFAT, 2020). Danish Crown is one of the largest pork processors in Europe, and the Ringsted plant, while not the largest slaughterhouse in Denmark, is larger than any other slaughterhouse in the other Nordic countries. Danish authorities quickly dealt with the crisis, and Danish Crown was able to swiftly shift production to other facilities, such that overall production was barely affected. Still, the incident is illustrative of several of the issues that we want to highlight in this article. As mentioned, previous research on slaughterhouse workers in Denmark had shown that migrant workers in Danish slaughterhouses were not segmented from the Danish labour market. However, one of the causes of this outbreak was the fact that migrant workers at the Ringsted plant lived in crowded conditions, and travelled to work in crowded vehicles. Because many of the migrant workers in the slaughterhouse industry in Denmark are there for a limited time, with the purpose to earn money, they do not prioritise spending money on housing, which is expensive in Denmark (interview, Denmark, employers association and agricultural union representative, March 2021). In dealing with this outbreak, the Danish government, in line with its strict approach for handling coronavirus in general, issued provisional regulations stipulating that workers should have improved and more spacious housing conditions, which would be monitored by the Labour Inspectorate. Testing requirements on workers were also increased. Representatives from Swedish slaughterhouses ascribed (Sonesson, 2023) a lack of disruptions in Swedish slaughterhouses to among other things relatively good working and living conditions for migrant labour, which, like Denmark, constitute a significant part of the slaughterhouse labour force. Interviewees with insight into Swedish slaughterhouses largely confirmed this (interview with officials from the relevant union in Sweden, March and April 2021; interview with a manager from a Swedish slaughterhouse, December 2022).

Another coronavirus outbreak, in Sweden, in the summer of 2021, involved hundreds of Thai berry pickers (Hedberg, 2022; Wingborg, 2021). Despite continued formal demands for testing (see above), it was determined that the outbreak originated with untested workers. A major berry company in Sweden, according to an interview (2022), suspects that due to corruption, many Thai workers were not actually tested. A regional physician in Sweden (interview, 2022), responsible for these issues, stated that the housing situation was advantageous for stopping the

disease since the workers were living and working in smaller groups. Some berry companies also arranged quarantine housing for infected workers. A notable precarious condition was that most migrant workers continued working despite being infected with coronavirus in order not to lose their earnings. From a worker's perspective, this is quite problematic. The initial reporting from this outbreak also makes clear that Swedish authorities prioritised efforts to impede the spread of disease to Swedish society without much concern for how the workers were coping (Hedberg, 2022). There was a similar outbreak in northern Finland in the summer of 2021 where it was estimated that 70% of the Thai berry pickers were infected. They had been tested when arriving in the country, and they had got one Astra Zeneca vaccine shot in Thailand. They were quarantined for 10 days and were forbidden to work during those days (Tykkyläinen, 2021). Cramped housing conditions led to the outbreak, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment promised more attention will be paid to these conditions in the future (Vaarama, 2021).

2020—A good production year

In Finland, it was reported that roughly half (~7000) of the usual number of migrant labourers (not including wild berry pickers) in agriculture came. What was remarkable was that while some Ukrainian workers did eventually come, no Russians were able to come to work in agriculture—their number would normally have been around 2500 (De Fresnes, 2020). Most migrant workers were able to come to Denmark for 2020 (interview, Denmark, employers association and agricultural union representative, March 2021), though between February and April 2021, third-country interns, mostly Ukrainians, who work in pork production were not able to come due to Danish travel restrictions put in place during a 2021 spring surge in coronavirus cases. Interviews and anecdotal accounts from the Swedish press indicate that most migrant workers were able to come to Sweden in 2020, with the exception of wild berry pickers where only roughly half were able to come. In the meantime, there was no noticeable effect on production statistics.

Despite its inauspicious beginning, it turned out that 2020 was actually a good year, economically and in terms of production, for farmers and slaughterhouses in the Nordic countries. In Sweden, where there was initially a concern for a 'summer without strawberries', 2020 ended up with a record strawberry harvest (Jordbruksverket, 2021). Denmark reported one of the best years overall for Danish agriculture (Bramsen et al., 2020). More specifically, the Danish pork industry, of which much of the production is designated for export, also had a good year in 2020 in part because a swine flu outbreak among German pigs led to a temporary shortage of pork on international markets (Danish Agricultural & Food Council, 2021). The agricultural season in Norway was also relatively good (Statistics Norway, 2022), while Finland's harvest was within normal bounds. Wild berry picking results were more mixed. The summer of 2020 offered a good harvest of blueberries in Sweden's forests. Because of the good harvest conditions, berry pickers were able to pick more than normal, which mitigated the delayed start of the season and the fact that only half of the planned number of workers came to Sweden. Still, the outcome was uneven between the companies. While some companies 'took a chance' and hired workers, other companies had to find berries in other ways and thus produced what they called 'expensive berries' for the season (interview with Swedish berry company, 2022). The annual cloudberry harvest in Finland was smaller than normal, although the growing season was very good (interview with an expert on berry picking in Finland, 2021).

An example from Sweden exemplifies the mood among important decision-makers in Nordic agri-food systems as the first pandemic year neared its end. At a webinar hosted by the Royal Swedish Academy of Forestry and Agriculture in November 2020, representatives from the LRF, the Swedish Food Agency (Livsmedelsverket), the Swedish grain cooperative Lantmännen and other actors discussed how Swedish agri-food systems coped with the challenges presented by the pandemic. As the CEO of LRF said, 'the agricultural sector—agriculture and forestry—on the whole thus far has managed this crisis very well' (Coronapandemins effekter på svensk livsmedelsförsörjning, 2020). A 'dependence' (Ibid) on migrant labour and their importance was mentioned by several participants in this webinar, including LRF, but their working conditions were not discussed at all.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

With respect to our first question (as posed in the Introduction), we found that coronavirus exposed differential treatment between migrant workers and local or resident workers, on the one hand, and between different groups of migrant workers, on the other hand. A diverse spectrum emerged of different vulnerabilities, working conditions and living situations ranging from tenuously decent to clearly precarious. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of how migrant workers are treated differently than domestic workers is the proposals to offer salary supplements to unemployed Nordic residents to entice them to work in agricultural jobs otherwise staffed by migrants. While these proposals were ultimately never put into action, with the exception of Norway, they serve as a grudging acknowledgement on the part of employers that current wages, even if they are union-approved, are not acceptable for domestic labour. This is an indication of dual or segmented labour markets, in particular with respect to horticulture, which was most discussed in the early part of the pandemic. The jobs that migrants take are 'undesirable' for locals and residents, hence the need to try to improve conditions when it was feared that more pliable migrant labour would not be able to come to the Nordic countries. While our results clearly show that migrant workers accept salaries that would rarely be accepted by Nordic residents and that there are indications that migrants from outside the EU get even lower salaries than EU migrants, this needs to be further substantiated. It also needs to be further researched to what extent collective bargaining agreements, which serve to ensure decent salaries for all workers in the Nordic countries, are breached or circumvented in different ways. While our study confirms that this does happen, we do not know to what extent.

Beyond salaries, risks and burdens are experienced in differentiated ways that are important to map out. This relates to the increased risk for virus infection, particularly in travelling to the Nordic countries, but also resulting from the precarious conditions of some workers. This is an example of how risks are shifted to migrants by employers and authorities, maybe not intentionally, but still as a concrete impact. Here, it is clear that third-country migrants 'posted' to the Nordic countries, such as the Thai berry pickers, who are bound by agreements with recruiters in their home countries are in particularly precarious situations, which are difficult to fully control from within the Nordic countries. They are an example of a group that cannot benefit from the advantages of the Nordic model of work relations because of the peculiarities of their working status as posted workers. Furthermore, it seems that the public health authorities in Sweden were more concerned with preventing migrant berry pickers from infecting other people in society and not with the health and safety of migrant workers.

Slaughterhouse workers also experienced burdens and risks in relation to Covid. Like the berry pickers, migrant slaughterhouse workers have to adapt to coronavirus in a way that restricts their freedom—in particular, as noted above, living in crowded conditions to maximise earnings—but in contrast to many natives, it also potentially threatens their earning potential (since presumably their living costs in Denmark increase). It can of course also be argued that the apparent preference to live in crowded conditions reflects the deeper ontological life situation precarity discussed above. That being said, it is important to keep in mind that slaughterhouse workers are comparatively well-paid and have union support. Also, to be clear, we are not arguing that the public did not have an interest, given the pandemic, in regulating how berry pickers or meat packers live—everyone faced restrictions to one degree or another. Rather, the point we want to make is that it is important to explicitly map out the costs for migrant workers of these measures. The larger point here is that these cases illustrate how we have to take into account multidimensional factors, including wages and working conditions, and an assessment of risks and burdens beyond the work situation if we want to outline patterns of segmentation in labour markets.

Our second question concerns the importance of migrant workers for food production, that is, their role and significance. Here, our assessment is somewhat ambiguous. First, we have preliminarily counted the number of migrant workers—~88,600—coming to the Nordic countries, mostly in horticulture, agriculture and wild berry picking. This is almost certainly an undercount, but our intention in this article was not to present a definitive number but rather to indicate an order of magnitude. However, it would be important to more accurately count migrant workers, especially given the acknowledgement of ‘dependency’ on migrant labourers as indicated above in Sweden. Counting is a difficult task since migrants originating from an EU country do not need to apply for work permits. Also, migrant flows are constantly changing in terms of long-term trends and short-term unexpected events, as the ongoing war in Ukraine has shown us, further underscoring the need for continued study of who is migrating, where they are going and which jobs they are performing. In posing such questions, our intent, to be clear, is not to recommend surveillance of migrant workers but rather to make their contributions to food production in the Nordic countries more visible.

Above, we quoted a statement, early in the pandemic, from the head of LRF to the effect that the jobs that migrant workers perform would be valued higher in the future thanks to greater awareness due to coronavirus of how important these jobs are. We have on the contrary found no indication that this predicted reevaluation among agri-food system actors has occurred. Here, we speculate that the fact that 2020 ended up as a good year in terms of production has perhaps overruled earlier concerns about migrant workers. The issue of dependency however is not going away. The owner of a slaughterhouse in Sweden, who was worried about the implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the possibilities of eastern Europeans to travel to Sweden to work in meat production, was quoted in the media (Saldert & Nicander, 2022) saying: ‘Everyone’s talking about the importance of Swedish produced meat—households, the authorities, and politicians. But it’s “good night” for Swedish meat production without capable butchers from Poland, Czechia, the Baltic countries, Romania and Ukraine’.

Our third question, in line with some of the early commentary on the pandemic (Bisoffi et al., 2021; Clapp & Moseley, 2020), was if the precarity of migrant workers is a vulnerability for the agri-food system. We offer a preliminary answer here with respect to slaughterhouses, where this issue was particularly visible. First, we note that meat production in Denmark and Sweden did not face the same disruptions during the pandemic as in Germany or the US. We also note that working conditions in Danish slaughterhouses have been judged by earlier research to ‘avoid’ precarity (Refslund & Wagner, 2018), while interviewees in Sweden also cited relatively

good working and living conditions for migrant workers. Based on this, we propose the hypothesis that a lesser degree of precarity among workers contributed to what looks like a less vulnerable response to the pandemic stress test in this particular case. In proposing this hypothesis, we are in no way implying that migrants do not face precarious work conditions in the Nordic countries. Moreover, as noted, slaughterhouse workers in the Nordic countries can still experience aspects of precarity, as social mobility can be difficult and there are health risks, not to mention the increased social risk and fragmented life situations that extend beyond the work relation. Still, we are saying that some migrants have better work conditions and face less risk (precarity) than others, which is why it is important to map out ongoing segmentation in labour markets in the branches under study for this article. The question for further study is if better or less precarious work conditions in the agri-food system entail less vulnerability with respect to production disruptions.

Above, we have in different ways pointed to the need for more research. In this regard, it is important to say that getting the perspectives of the migrant workers themselves would be an essential aspect of addressing the questions posed in this conclusion.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Some horticulture farms in Sweden hire Thai workers, using the same recruitment networks as for wild berries.
- ² Saitone et al. (2021) estimate that the presence of a beef processing facility in a US county led to a 100% initial increase in coronavirus spread, and pork facilities led to a 160% increase in coronavirus spread in the county. Overtime, however, disease rates of counties with and without meat processing facilities converged.
- ³ According to Cowley (2020) 'daily capacity at U.S. cattle and hog facilities declined as much as 45 percent in May 2020' (also cited in Balagtas & Cooper, 2021).
- ⁴ According to this source, Brazilian meat imports to the US, many sourced directly from the Amazon, increased by 50% during 2020, connecting coronavirus, poor working conditions in US meat packing plants, and deforestation in Brazil.
- ⁵ A reform in 2021 banned subcontracting work in Germany and put limits on the use of temporary agency workers.
- ⁶ These figures are an amalgamation of official numbers and estimates from the different Nordic countries under consideration here. For Sweden, for example, there are roughly 13,000 migrants in horticulture and wild berry picking. It is difficult to count migrant workers in Swedish farming as many come from the EU and thus have the right to work in Sweden. The Swedish Federation of Farmers (Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund [LRF], 2020), estimates that 8000 migrants work in horticulture. This estimate was made early in the pandemic and represents a best guess based on official statistics on the number of part-time jobs in the horticulture sector (see the above reference for an explanation on how they made their estimate). Dairy farming in Sweden also employs a number of migrant workers; however, many of these workers come from EU countries and are therefore difficult to count. Statistics Sweden also made an estimate based on different data but arriving at a similar figure (Statistics Sweden [SCB], 2020). The number of wild berry pickers in Sweden—5000—is based on official statistics from the Swedish immigration authority (Migrationsverket, 2021). Wild berry pickers in Sweden are mostly third-country nationals and are thus easier to count because they require work visas to come to Sweden. To Denmark come roughly 25,600 foreign workers (Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment [STAR], 2021), while Finland hosts some 16,000 'short-term' foreign agricultural workers (Natural Resources Institute Finland [LUKE], 2018, 2022), plus 4000 wild berry pickers (Viinikka, 2021). In the Danish case, the numbers include agriculture, horticulture, forestry and fishing, with the majority being in agriculture and horticulture. Thirty thousand migrant workers are estimated to work in agriculture in Norway. This figure is an estimate made by the authors based on a study from 2022 conducted by the Institute for Rural and Regional Research (Ruralis) in Norway (Zahl-Thanem & Melås, 2022; see also Rye et al., 2018). The total of these different figures and estimates is 88,600.

⁷A survey in 2016 from the Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2016) estimated that 54% of firms in the 'Green Economy', which includes agriculture, forestry and fishing, had signed the relevant collective bargaining agreement.

⁸In Norway, furloughed workers have their allowances reduced hour by hour if they find or take a job. As agricultural wage rates are often far lower than allowances, many furloughed workers were losing money by taking on farm work. Thus, an exception allowed for furloughed workers to keep half of their allowances in addition to their farm wages.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All interviews were conducted with informed consent. No potentially vulnerable persons were interviewed for this article (e.g., no migrant labourers were interviewed), and no sensitive personal information was gathered from interviewees.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data consist either of material in the public domain (such as newspaper articles), the source of which can be found in the list of references or interviews, the transcripts from which cannot be shared.

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