Migrant workers in Swedish agriculture - attitudes, opportunities and challenges

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Introduction

Finding competent work force is a challenge for many farmers and owners of companies within agriculture and horticulture in Sweden. This is even more a great issue when it’s a matter of finding seasonal workers. During a number of years there has been an increasing share of the work force with a non-Swedish background. But – they are not immigrants who are becoming integrated in rural areas – they are seasonal migrant workers from other countries. The working conditions for these migrant workers are not well documented and their own experiences and attitudes and not yet studied. There is also lacking knowledge about the perspectives of the Swedish co-workers and the owners / managers on farms with migrant workers.

With economical support from the Swedish Farmers Foundation for Agricultural Research (SLF) these issues has been studied during a couple of years. A reference group was linked to the project with representatives from the Swedish Farmers Federation (LRF), Lund university, the Swedish Work Environment Authority, the Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union as well as the Federation of Swedish Forestry and Agricultural Employers (SLA). A network of researchers from Sweden, the Nordic countries as well as international has also been established. As an initial activity it was held a special session on migrant workers in Nordic agriculture during the Nordic Meeting on Agricultural Occupational Health and Safety in Sweden (Lundqvist (red), 2012)

A literature review

The project started with an extensive literature review with a focus on migrant agricultural workers and their socioeconomic, occupational and health conditions together with researchers at Lund and Malmö universities (Svensson et al, 2012).

The results showed that he nature of included 237 studies are often multifaceted and discuss migrant farmworkers’ labour and psychosocial conditions, and their access to basic social services, migrant farmworkers’ exposure to various chemicals, ergonomic risks and occupational injuries, migration policies (models and best practices) in different countries, and the social, economic, and cultural influences of migration on the work environment in agriculture.

We concluded that most of the reviewed studies highlighted that migrant farmworkers work under very poor working conditions and face numerous health and safety hazards. Many studies pointed out numerous factors, ranging from inefficient laws, economic conditions to social and cultural backgrounds of migrant agricultural workers.

A web-based survey to farmers

The next step in our project was a web-based survey to members of the Swedish Farmers Federation (LRF) with questions about their use external work-force with a special focus on migrant workers on their farms during one year. The survey was responded by almost 4000 farmers, indicating that 20% of them used migrant workers during 2011.

Results showed that migrant workers are common both for shorter and longer periods within animal production, horticulture, forestry as well as construction work on farms. Most of the migrant workers came from the Eastern part of Europe, such as Poland, Lithuania and Romania, with the goal to earn a better income.

Regarding the need for further support as employer of migrant workers it was pointed out the communication with the migrant workers as a critical issue, regarding issues as work instructions, health and safety and food hygiene.
Work-place studies in agriculture

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews in 13 workplaces with the employers, native Swedish co-workers and migrant workers (in their own language). The interviews was done in different parts of Sweden in companies having field grown crops such as salad, carrots, cucumbers as well as companies with greenhouses, forestry, milk-, meat- and pork-production.

The interviews had a focus on communication issues such as work instructions, health and safety and food hygiene. The employers were mostly males 35-65 years of age, the supervisors were both males and females and also both Swedish and other nationalities (30-55 years of age). The migrant workers interviewed was most often from Poland and Lithuania, both females and males (14-60 years of age).

Preliminary results from work-place studies

Employer perspectives

The employers told us that they enjoyed migrant workers since they were most often loyal, good and motivated and living close to the work-place during the season means access to a flexible work-force.

They also stated that “I have no other option if I am going to survive in this type of business” and “No Swedes want to work with this type of work” and “Migrant worker is never complaining”.

Communication with the migrant workers is not always a big issue, often depending on how qualified the work operations are for the individual workers and the access to informal supervisors speaking Swedish or English. The problems seems to increase with the more advanced work tasks and as the companies grows with more workers. The employers has applied a number of strategies to cope with the problems, such as written instructions in the native language – but not a flexible system if anything needs to be changed. Other employers have informal supervisors or a “middle man” who speaks English or Swedish, but the employers are the quite dependent and not always trusting them to 100%. Still it was concluded that there are no good solutions for communication between the employer and the migrant workers which is flexible and trustworthy.

The cultural barriers is also present, there is a big different between the workers and their employer if it is Swedish or migrant workers, not only because of the communication issues but also to the culture and traditions from their home countries. A number of employers did a great job to loosen up the barriers and arranged a number of social activities.

The employers also brought up the problems with authorities regarding their migrant worker issues such as working permits, health issues, tax-registrations and other formalities.

Perspectives of the seasonal workers

The interviews with the migrant workers was most often done during their work or during breaks at the work place, by us researchers or by the help of an interpreter. The migrants were not so open to talk about their working conditions and the communications issues, which might be solved by other ways of performing interviews in the future.

The migrants were all very happy about their ability to earn a good income while working in Sweden, but they often expressed that they missed their families and children and they were not always happy about the standard of living. They did not express complaints about the ability to communicate with the employer, but some of them expressed that it would have been much better and sometimes less problematic if there would be a better way of communicating directly with the employer or the Swedish supervisor.

Other findings

Working conditions with manual work operations is a problem which was lifted by all categories involved in the studies; employers, seasonal workers and supervisors. Other problems could be miss-use of alcohol, but the employers most often had a zero-acceptance for that which could lead to losing their jobs.
The way forward

The project is going towards the end and a final seminar has been organized with the stakeholders and the reference group also including future actions needed.

Within the project there will be produced information and support material for both employers and migrant workers.

New ideas includes developing of safety guidelines with drawings – without any text. This is a concept which has been developed by the Swedish construction industry and our plans are to test the concept for manual work in field grown crops.

Another idea is to test the new translation apps which is available for smart phones, in which you can say words in one language and then it says the words in another language of your own choice.

A positive initiative is taken by the Swedish certification board Sigill - they are with our and others help developing standards for working conditions in horticulture. In the future will the consumers be able to find out if the products meets the standards for good working conditions if everything works out well.

Finally is our intentions to initiate further international collaboration on the issues of working conditions for migrant workers – it is the new normal for our industry – the work-force in Swedish field grown crops which need seasonal labor has 80% migrant workers.

References
