



CAN SEASONAL WORK SCHEMES BE SOCIALLY JUST?

Ruth McAreavey





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Seasonal workers often fill temporary positions that are poorly paid and commonly deemed undesirable by residents. While seasonal work schemes can benefit both employers and the local economy, they often fuel the uneven economic participation and marginalisation of migrants. Professor Ruth McAreavey of Newcastle University recently published a paper outlining issues that should be addressed if seasonal worker schemes are to achieve social justice.

The global migration rate has remained stable at around 3% for some time now, although overall numbers have increased. However, statistics do not always capture migration patterns accurately. In fact, not all migrants move through routes that are recognised by governments as being legal, and so do not fit into the categories outlined by government organisations.

Migration may benefit local and national economies, but migrants can also be exploited and marginalised. For example, this can occur in the agri-food sector when migrants are disproportionately represented and find themselves working in jobs that may be poorly paid and are labour-intensive. These migrants are represented as entrepreneurial agents, but in reality, their actions are curtailed and controlled.

Ruth McAreavey, a Professor in Sociology at Newcastle University, has recently published an article exploring the role of migrants in the agri-food sector in Europe, and the issues associated with many temporary migration programs. This is a timely and salient topic, given that Brexit has led to significant losses in seasonal labour and with the introduction of a new UK-specific seasonal worker scheme.

In her paper, Professor McAreavey firstly provides a general definition of 'social justice' using a theoretical framework introduced by Nancy Fraser, while also delineating some common obstacles to achieving it. She suggests that social justice refers to equal participation of all individuals in society. In other words, social justice means that all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully. It considers this from cultural, economic and political perspectives.

Professor McAreavey goes on to highlight obstacles that can prevent seasonal worker schemes from achieving social justice, including economic inequalities, unequal treatment across ethnic groups, and power relations that privilege specific groups at the expense of others.

Professor McAreavey used Fraser's idea of 'frame setting' to closely examine injustices associated with the agri-food sector's recruitment of migrants and with other temporary work schemes. According to Fraser, frame setting entails establishing boundaries that exclude specific groups from society, offering them limited or no access to a country's shared resources. In other words, it creates boundaries around who is included and who is excluded. Professor McAreavey's article offers



an in-depth analysis of how seasonal worker schemes in the agri-food sector have evolved over time. She questions the extent to which they can uphold the human rights of migrants or even promote their fair integration into society.

The way in which food is produced and consumed worldwide has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Today, 75% of the global agricultural market is controlled by three big corporations, which leverage modern technologies to continuously reduce the costs of their products. Moreover, fewer companies are involved in food distribution than in the past, drastically reducing producers' margins, and pressuring them to cut production costs.

This global trend in agri-food systems often means that food producers and crop growers are under pressure to reduce their workers' wages or seek cheap labour. Therefore, many jobs in agri-food have become unappealing for locals in many countries, due to the poor working conditions, lack of job security, and low wages.

Ultimately, many migrants who are in desperate need for a job or escaping adverse circumstances end up becoming seasonal agricultural workers, filling these essential yet demeaning positions. Migration regimes therefore create conditions that allow employers to undermine wages and working conditions.

In her paper, Professor McAreavey discusses the growing reliance of agri-food systems on migrants as temporary workers, highlighting the precarity, challenges, and inequality associated with this phenomenon.

For instance, she explains that while there are many recognised seasonal worker schemes in place, not all temporary workers are employed through official schemes. As many workers are not legitimately employed, they are not offered the same benefits that are provided to legal workers. In many European countries, the processes required to attain legal working documents can be highly tedious, encouraging many migrants to 'slip' into illegality.



Illegal workers are often not provided with necessary protection while working, which is both highly demeaning and dangerous. As they are not offered long-term positions and they receive very low wages, many temporary workers do not have the same opportunities for participating in society. In many cases, migrants' temporary work becomes a means to an end, allowing them to send money to their families or to save for things like building a house in their home countries.

Professor McAreavey emphasises how all these issues are connected to Fraser's model of social justice, which is basically about participatory parity and understanding what it takes for individuals to be properly recognised and given full opportunity to participate equally in society.

In her article, Professor McAreavey also discusses the issues associated with seasonal work schemes, including both those in agriculture and other sectors. She explains how schemes for seasonal work in Europe and other countries worldwide evolved over the past century.

She then describes the use of temporary worker programmes, such as those implemented by the Australian government, and New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer Schemes. Temporary worker programmes can sometimes be used by seasonal

workers to enter a country and start working there legitimately. Dedicated schemes, such as the Recognised Seasonal Employer Schemes, on the other hand, can be effective. They not only aim to fill a gap in the labour market but they also provide seasonal workers with better wages, as well as greater job security and stability.

Finally, Professor McAreavey talks about seasonal labour in the UK. After Brexit, the UK encountered difficulties in recruiting seasonal workers, as fewer workers returned due to new visa restrictions. This led to the creation of a new pilot seasonal worker scheme, which appears to place greater emphasis on managing migration than on protecting the rights of workers.

In her recent work, Professor McAreavey offers valuable insight about seasonal worker schemes and the extent to which they can be socially just. In the future, her considerations could pave the way for new studies exploring the fairness of these schemes and issues associated with them.

In addition, her study could serve as a guide for policymakers who are trying to devise tailored and more effective seasonal worker schemes, to manage migration, improve the working conditions of seasonal workers, and facilitate their integration in society.

This SciPod is a summary of the paper 'Seasonal worker schemes: Can they achieve social justice?', from Europa XXI. doi.org/10.7163/Eu21.2019.37.3

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