

# SWEDEN

## 1. OVERVIEW

The Swedish strategy against the Covid-19 pandemic has been to avoid a complete lockdown. Instead, large gatherings have been banned and physical distancing is practiced at workplaces and in other locations in which people congregate.<sup>63</sup>

Swedish unemployment benefits and social security schemes have been adapted to the strains on workers and labour markets, making them more inclusive and covering more precarious workers.<sup>64</sup> However, the qualifying periods for these schemes and the way the short-time work allowance (furlough) system works render them de facto unavailable for migrant workers. This applies in particular to those employed in the agri-food sector, who have flexible, hourly-based forms of employment contracts with limited access to sick leave.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, lockdown measures – travel bans, curfews etc. – were implemented before the start of the harvest season in Sweden. This has limited the possibilities for workers to travel to Sweden in order to search for employment in the agri-food sector.

## 2. THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE AGRIFOOD SYSTEM

Any private company which suffers a significant decrease in turnover due to the pandemic is covered by a specific government financial support scheme<sup>66</sup> worth a total of roughly the equivalent of € 4 billion. The size of the grant varies depending on the actual loss of turnover and covers up to 75 percent of the enterprise's fixed costs, excluding wages. Companies must have had a minimum €25,000 turnover during

the last fiscal year and the drop in turnover must exceed 30 percent to qualify.<sup>67</sup> Agri-food companies unable to harvest produce due to Covid-19 restrictions will likely benefit from these grants.

Companies have faced a shortage of workers, given that access to Sweden was limited by travel restrictions.<sup>68</sup> For a couple of months, the ban on travelling to Sweden also covered migrant workers in the agri-food sector. However, following political pressure from the sector this category of migrants was included among the exceptions to the travel ban.<sup>69</sup> However, travel restrictions in other parts of the world make it very hard to actually travel to Sweden.

Employers report a dire situation and an acute demand in the green sector for 5000 workers in the fields and 3000 workers in forestry.<sup>70</sup> While workers from EU countries could mostly travel to Sweden to take up jobs in farming, those from third countries, particularly Thailand, who mostly pick wild berries in forests, could not.<sup>71</sup>

Despite an increase in unemployment, Swedish workers are not applying for jobs in the agri-food sector.<sup>72</sup> Researchers assume that the unemployed in the domestic workforce will not take up the positions not filled by migrant workers who are unable to travel to Sweden. It has been suggested that the harsh working conditions, not salaries, are the prime reason nationals do not take up jobs in the green sector.

The shortage of workers may be contributing to an increase in consumer prices for fruit and vegetables.<sup>73</sup> In April, these products became 4 and 4.4 percent more expensive, respectively.<sup>74</sup> Sweden has had no shortage of consumer goods, while demand for food

has shifted away from restaurants to home delivery of foods and groceries.<sup>75</sup> The domestic transport system is largely unaffected by the pandemic.

However, companies operating in the agri-food sector have not experienced a large difference in terms of productivity before and during the pandemic. The demand for agricultural products has decreased from restaurants, but has increased from supermarket retailers.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, some companies have had to adjust their sales models, partially modifying the regular agri-food supply chain.<sup>77</sup>

### **3. THE CONSEQUENCES FOR WORKERS**

No significant new consequences of the pandemic have been reported on the working conditions of labourers in the green sector.<sup>78</sup> The flexible and precarious conditions of employment in the sector have been exacerbated, but at the same time the travel restrictions have enabled migrant workers who are already in Sweden to work more hours, thereby possibly receiving a decent salary. In workplaces where precarious and flexible employment is the norm, no significant changes have been reported due to the shortage of migrant workers. Migrant workers can travel to Sweden to work in agriculture, but are often not allowed to return to their countries because of restrictions there – especially for travellers coming from Sweden – which might affect their decisions to take up employment there in the first place.<sup>79</sup> Overall, there have been significant increases in both the numbers of individual remittances and the total amounts, although the costs of sending money have increased. A possible explanation might be that migrants are stranded in Sweden and that their relatives in their countries of origin are experiencing a greater need for resources.

In the green sector, safety officers have not reported any corona-related incidents or asked the Swedish Work Environment Agency to require employers to implement particular safety measures due to the pandemic.<sup>80</sup>

The trade union responsible for organising workers in the green sector is also responsible for the health care sector. The pandemic has put enormous strain on the latter and its workers, requiring a massive effort on the part of the trade union, who may have given less attention to agri-food workers as a consequence.

Collective bargaining for the renewal of national sectoral collective agreements has been postponed to the autumn. These collective agreements – which cover most agri-food sectors, but not berry-picking – were supposed to expire on 30 June and are now due to do so on 30 November. The shortage of seasonal workers from Thailand in berry-picking will be filled up by so-called free workers from Central and Eastern Europe, who most likely will not be formally employed and will therefore not be covered by a collective agreement. In negotiations at the workplace level, the pandemic has been instrumentalised by employers to reject claims for better conditions, threaten to close down the company or refuse to negotiate at all.<sup>81</sup>

It has been highlighted that the working environment in agriculture reduces the risk of spreading the virus because the work is in open fields and often in isolated conditions.<sup>82</sup> However, this does not apply to all activities in the agri-food sector. In processing plants, space is very limited and no special measures have been taken by employers to protect the workers' health. A widespread problem has concerned access to information for migrant workers regarding health and safety standards and on how to receive access to unemployment schemes and sick leave.<sup>83</sup>

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

The Swedish government is supporting the green sector indirectly through a programme worth the equivalent of €15 million aimed at hiring unemployed and low-skilled workers to maintain publicly owned fields and forests.<sup>84</sup> The idea is that these workers will develop skills and take up employment in agri-food businesses.

Employers are generally satisfied with government measures, except for complaints regarding miscommunication between the Migration Office (*Migrationsverket*) and the Border Police (*Gränspolis*), who obstructed the entry of third-country nationals who were lawfully allowed to enter Sweden to work in forestry.<sup>85</sup>

#### **5. INITIATIVES BY FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS**

The farmers' organisation and the Swedish Public Employment Service have upscaled a pre-existing project aimed at supporting and promoting employment in the agri-food sector.<sup>86</sup> According to the employers' organisation in the green sector, recruiting workers from within the EU does not present any problem, implying that no particular initiative is needed at this point.<sup>87</sup>

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

No organised strikes or concerted actions on the part of employees in the Swedish agri-food sector have been reported. Wildcat strikes not supported by unions have occurred in individual workplaces. These strikes were only partially related to the pandemic, which could have exacerbated situations of precariousness and a lack of information about working conditions.<sup>88</sup>