

Migrant Labour Opportunities in the Agrifood Companies in Slovakia: A Case Study

Pracovné príležitosti migrantov v agropotravinárskych podnikoch na Slovensku: Prípadová štúdia

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Abstract

This contribution aims to examine the complex links between labor migration and the agri-food sector in Slovakia, to draw attention to legal and social requirements and problems. Our intention in this paper is to contribute to the scientific debate about migrant workers who migrate as a result of current global problems. Special attention is paid to the current and potential impact of the crisis in Ukraine and on migrant work in the agri-food sector in Slovakia, to the investigation of the activities of agrifood companies as part of measures to address the working and living conditions of migrant workers and to support long-term social support and economic inclusion. While the participation of migrant workers is a key element in the implementation of corporate social responsibility and ethnic marketing, the participation of agri-food companies is also a means of harnessing the power of consumers and influencing rational and irrational consumer behavior through CSR activities in the local food market.

Keywords: *Agrifood companies, Consumer behavior, Corporate social responsibility, Food market, Irrational consumer behavior, Rational consumer behavior*

JEL Classification: M14, M3, Q1

In recent decades, offering job opportunities to migrants has been a structural element of market segments, such as the agri-food sector. It broadly states that migrant labor has become essential to the functioning of agri-food systems in Europe (DECONINCK, K., et al. 2020), due to the intensification of agricultural production and processing in both contexts (CASTELL, Z. – ALVAREZ, Y. P. 2022), the agricultural sector itself has undergone critical structural changes that have supported the shift to flexible work and the reduction of "standard" work arrangements. Coupled with new labor mobility regimes and opaque agri-food supply chain structures in Europe, these changes have undoubtedly brought migrant agricultural workers into an industry full of working conditions (BORRELLI, E. and OLINTO, B., 2022).

Reflecting the conceptualization of nexus as a kind of nodal or interconnected system with multiple linkages and relationships, we propose that agri-food production and human migration have several interlinkages that shape and form each other. Among the most significant of these connections is how agricultural intensification creates new demands for flexible supplies of non-local labor (KALANTARYAN, S., et al. 2021). In connection with migration, agrifood companies support the efficient spatial allocation of a mobile workforce according to the requirements of harvesting crops at different times of the year in different regions. While these relationships are by no means new—there is a long

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history of mobile labor supplying the needs of agriculture in many parts of the world—the contemporary application of industrial principles to food production and its packaging, processing, and marketing is remarkable. As part of marketing, agrifood companies aim to promote suitable working conditions for migrants, provide social and economic support and make consumers aware of these activities as part of PR and corporate social responsibility. At the same time, there has been a shift in the demand for low-wage workers in the agrifood sector from local domestic sources to a workforce acquired on the global stage through international migration. In an increasingly globalized market for cheap, standardized food, the use of low-wage migrant workers from poor and marginalized regions of the world helps producers maintain a competitive advantage (KING, R., et al. 2021).

There are several insufficient regulations, laws and policies that make it difficult to monitor and enforce the labor rights of migrants both in Europe and in Slovakia. Over the past 30 years, several initiatives have been launched to engage governments, farmers, retailers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), agri-food businesses and even consumers in providing new opportunities to improve working conditions for incoming migrants. Labeling or certification programs have become an effective strategy for solving problems related to food safety and quality standards of food processes in businesses. Some of these programs have succeeded in designing, developing, and launching awareness campaigns to make civil society an active stakeholder in certain consumer-led schemes, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic made migrant workers a significant part of the political agenda of the countries where they were considered essential or necessary for the functioning of local economies during a pandemic crisis (PALUMBO, L. – CORRADO, A. 2022).

In Europe and also in Slovakia, food labeling is characterized by various systems aimed at raising awareness of the benefits of safe, organic, healthy, local and traditional and/or ecological products, including some examples of initiatives focused mainly on fair working conditions. and migrant workers. These programs include internationally recognized schemes such as the Equitable Food Initiative and the Fair Food Program, which have developed a series of standards and certification documents specifically for the assessment and evaluation of working conditions. As for migrant workers, their employment in the agri-food system offered an opportunity to respond to the need for a fresher and more suitable workforce in the agri-food sector in response to ongoing transformations. Opportunities for mobility within the EU have gradually provided EU migrant workers with new opportunities and tools to participate in the labor market in agriculture. On the other hand, the same possibility of easily crossing the EU's internal borders leads to "circular migration", which facilitates their involvement in illegal employment conditions and exploitative practices. (GHAZAL, A. 2021).

Forms of labor migration are very common and heavily regulated in Europe, where an ever-expanding migration bureaucracy controls entry, determines conditions of residence and sets working conditions. Migrant workers can be found in various labor markets, but are highly concentrated in services, hospitality, construction, care and hiring in the agri-food sector. In recent years, a growing number of migrants have been filling temporary jobs on farms and in the adjacent food and raw materials processing industries (FITTING E., et al, 2022).

The European Union (EU) migration crisis, which peaked in 2016, created a new urgency in the effort to address the numerous difficulties associated with mass migration (BARTH, H. – ZALKAT, G. 2021).

Agriculture, which is one of the largest employment sectors in the world, employs more than one billion people and accounts for 3% of global GDP. However, according to FAO (2018), it is essential to increase investment in agriculture and use improved technologies as the sector undergoes structural and demographic changes. Thanks to the common agricultural policy, the agricultural sector in the EU has recently become more market-oriented and entrepreneurial (GIANNAKIS, E. – BRUGGEMAN, A. 2015). International migration can contribute to development by introducing diversified and sustainable employment solutions in agrifood sectors. In Europe and North America, foreign labor forms the backbone of agricultural production (THE LINKAGES BETWEEN MIGRATION, AGRICULTURE, FOOD SECURITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT, 2018). Thus, international migration contributes to economic development through the introduction of new skills and jobs in both new and established industries and the creation of external networks and market linkages (BARTH, H. – ZALKAT, G. 2021).

Acculturation and consumer behavior

Moore et al. (2012) also pointed out that acculturation can be seen as a process of cultural change and adaptation that occurs in any type of 'change' or 'new environment'. This process also represents a new way of considering acculturation, as acculturation is also defined as a multidimensional construct. One dimension is the acceptance of the host or mainstream culture, and the other is the retention of one's original or ethnic culture by the migrant, which is closely related to the concept of ethnic identification. So moving to a new geographic location can automatically dictate new shopping behavior, e.g. there may be different food, different housing infrastructure, different architecture, different shopping areas and shops, etc. However, as more new members arrive in a city, area, or region, old values and purchasing behaviors may be tempered along the continuum of what was once normal behavior. Acculturation is a feature of global migration and cultural diversity in which migrants bring cultural characteristics from their countries of origin while adapting to their new cultures, attitudes and consumption behaviors (BERRY, 1980).

(NJOMO, 2012) also alludes to the fact that adaptation is one of the most important elements in migration studies worldwide. Acculturation definitions are concerned with the changes an individual experiences when in direct contact with a new culture and the word is "psychological acculturation". It is used in contrast to group-level acculturation, which refers to the structural, economic, and other changes of an entire group following contact with a new culture, as well as the change in rational and irrational behavior. However, since the early 1980s, cultural psychologists have recognized that adopting the beliefs, values, and practices of the receiving culture does not automatically mean that the migrant gets rid of the beliefs, values, and practices of the culture of origin, but his consumer behavior may be affected.

Berry (1980) developed an acculturation model in which the acquisition of the receiving culture and the preservation of cultural heritage are constructed as independent dimensions; and within this model these two dimensions intersect to form the following four acculturation categories:

1. Assimilation - accepts the receiving culture and gets rid of the heritage culture,
2. Separation – rejects the receiving culture and preserves the heritage culture,
3. Integration – accepts the receiving culture and preserves the heritage culture a
4. Marginalization - rejects both heritage and receiving cultures.

Consumer acculturation is considered as intercultural contact and resulting change for consumers in contact with a new culture. This includes learning the language and adapting to different lifestyles and manners, e.g. when purchasing goods and services and understanding various business activities such as social responsibility.

Acculturation of consumer behavior is a progressive learning process where values may change as contact with a new or dominant culture increases; the more acculturated a person or group is, the greater the progression toward the norms of the host or dominant culture (MOORE et al. 2012).

While most current definitions of consumer behavior are similar in scope as shown in the two definitions above, there is a different psychology in how consumers behave and make decisions about purchasing products and services. Based on this, the psychology of migrants' approach to purchasing a particular product or service may differ from that of the native population to the same product or service, despite the impact of acculturation on the former (SCHWARTZ et al. 2010).

Njomo (2012) explored some of the many factors that influence migrants in specific aspects. The opinion is that consumer behavior consists of two parts, i.e. j. factors influencing choice and the decision-making process. It is argued that individual and social factors influence the product and service choices that a consumer makes, but then the consumer's decision-making process is also dependent on other considerations within these five stages:

- recognizing a need or problem,
- searching for information,
- evaluating alternatives,
- making a purchase decision,
- post-purchase evaluation.

Berry et al. (2006), listed four categories of migrants and showed them inherent common features even though each is called differently.

1. Voluntary immigrants - these are people who voluntarily leave their homeland in search of employment, economic opportunities, marriage or join family members who have previously immigrated, e.g. doctors, engineers, IT professionals, etc.
2. Refugees - those who are involuntarily displaced by war, persecution or natural disasters and are settled in a new country, usually through agreements between international aid agencies and the governments of receiving countries;
3. Asylum seekers - those who choose to seek refuge in a new country out of fear of persecution or violence;
4. Foreigners – those who move to a new country temporarily and for a specific purpose with the full intention of returning home after the period has expired, e.g. international students, seasonal workers and corporate managers of multinational companies' as a term that brings them together under a single description or name.

Migrants and CSR

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is becoming a key topic in the food chain, in fact it has become a widespread topic along with sustainable consumption. Changes in citizens' values, lifestyles, and preferences—as well as a new business culture that considers the environmental and social impacts of productive activity (AMAESHI et al. 2008)—have increased interest in agricultural economics towards the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (IGAROVÁ, K., et al. 2023).

Agrifood companies interested in employing migrants cite numerous motivations, from corporate social responsibility (CSR) to the desire to benefit from the newly available workforce. While many companies are motivated and see the business case, employing migrants is often hampered by practical barriers such as language skills, cultural differences and issues related to experiences of forced displacement. The promotion of sustainability in the agri-food system is driven by both endogenous factors, such as the commitment of individual companies, and exogenous factors, such as consumer demand, which is increasingly focused on the issue of sustainability, CSR and national and international regulations, such as European agreement (MARCOCCI, G. 2021).

In many larger companies, CSR-related motivations are the main reason for their engagement. Several companies pointed to the importance of contributing to the efforts of governments and local communities to receive and integrate the large number of refugees arriving in Europe. This involvement can be further supported by their employees who may find it motivating or who in some cases have even asked management to be involved in these matters. The motivations related to assuming social responsibility are visible both in the communication of companies and in the displayed type of engagement, which can ultimately influence the consumer behavior of customers (DESAI, S. et al. 2020). While the business case for CSR is generally clear, political sensitivities around migration issues in many countries make refugee-focused CSR projects difficult due to the risk of politicizing the workplace. Employers are less likely to cite motivations related to a perceived business case, such as the need for certain employee profiles and skill sets not available in the existing workforce (especially in labor shortage regions) or creating a diverse workforce (BRZOWSKI, J. 2017). Developing the business case for hiring refugees may require tailored incentives (e.g. direct employment subsidies) and/or specific support to ensure skills development (e.g. language and vocational support). Although legal frameworks differ from country to country, employers cited similar barriers during the consultation: uncertainty about rights and length of stay, the need for skills information and matching, training and recruitment costs and a lack of entrepreneurial incentives, and problems with attitudes and expectations (OECD, 2016).

Figure 1 Employing refugees: challenges



Source: (OECD, 2016)

According to research, customers claim that they would lose trust in a brand that prioritizes profits over people, especially during crises like COVID-19 and the current situation in Ukraine. This is just one of the reasons why corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives of agrifood companies are increasingly important in the current situation. A company's community involvement has been shown to promote positive organizational growth, increased trust in the community, and employee support for the organizational mission. Being a socially responsible company and investing in the integration and empowerment of the local migrant community can strengthen a company's image and build a brand. This can improve customer loyalty, increase employee engagement and satisfaction, and even attract talent and resources. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a common blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future. The goals are an urgent call to action for all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership. Cooperation between the private sector and civil society plays a key role in achieving the goals of sustainable development (MADRID FOR REFUGEES, 2022).

Figure 2 Sustainable Development Goals



Source: (MADRID FOR REFUGEES, 2022)

Migration and ethnic marketing

As a result of increasing migration, marketers target ethnic groups with culturally accommodated marketing.

Ethnic marketing is a type of target marketing that is focused on ethnicity, and more specifically, ethnic groups or communities that are distinct from the mainstream or other groups. (JAMAL, A., et al., 2015). Ethnic marketing is a marketing strategy that uses ethnic, racial, religious, and inter-group proximity to communicate the extra value of a company's products or services, either individually or in groups. Interpretation of ethnicity depiction in advertising and how people infer ethnic identity, social acceptance, and inclusion in a culturally varied society from advertising imagery(HERMAWAN, D. 2022).

The immigrant business context is full of culturally diverse, sometimes even conflicting, expectations and norms that influence how ethnic businesses connect with mainstream markets. The topic of cultural influences on immigrant industrial marketing, such as ethnic marketing entrepreneurship, supply chain management, network capability development, buyer-seller relationships, and ethnic financial cushion, has attracted increasing attention from stakeholders and consumers. Consumer behavior influenced by ethnic marketing reflects their acculturation strategies, which can be classified into four groups: rebellion, rarity, resonance and restraint. This classification demonstrates the multidirectional acculturation strategies of ethnic consumers, which are also determined by their level of cosmopolitanism (DEY, B., et al. 2019).

Ethnic entrepreneurs such as agrifood companies can also contribute various forms of social capital to immigrant ethnic communities and, through their ties to suppliers and customers, can be useful in building bridges to other networks outside the inner circle, improving the chances of upward mobility (CLIP, 2011).

Key marketing indices remain critical (product understanding, competitive pricing, distribution channels, place and brand/brand). However, social and ethnic marketing are key indexes that need to be included in determining a new marketing mix offer and a customer-oriented sales paradigm, reporting CSR activities to influence consumer behavior. This new dynamic of ethnic marketing applies to all economic segments (finance, retail, services, IT, telecommunications, manufacturing and agriculture) (4PSQUARE, 2007).

Methodological procedure

The presented case study is focused on the connection between labor migration and the agrifood sector in Slovakia. To evaluate and describe the current situation in the Slovak agrifood sector, we conducted secondary research. The necessary secondary data were obtained from various databases Ústredie práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny. We used contingency tables and graphs to compare and evaluate the data.

Results

Labor opportunities in Slovakia

According to current statistical data on the employment of foreigners in Slovakia, published by the Center for Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, the number of migrants working in Slovakia is increasing significantly. In June 2023, the total number of employed foreigners in Slovakia reached an all-time high of 97,263. This represents a remarkable increase of 68% since June 2018, when 57,998 foreigners were employed.

Longer-term migrants in the country are mostly third-country nationals, with the majority being Ukrainians. The recent military conflict in Ukraine only contributed to this. The second most represented nationality is Serbian with approximately 9,400,000 employed nationals, followed by Romanians (7,200 employed). Most foreigners work in the west of Slovakia, in the area that offers the best job opportunities. Three out of ten foreigners – a total of 24,200 – working in Slovakia work in the Bratislava and Trnava regions, and 5,400 are employed in the Western Slovakia region. The labor market in Slovakia is undergoing a rapid transformation and rapid development, which results in a lack of market: currently, there are almost 100,000 vacancies nationwide, which companies find difficult to fill, especially in the agri-food sector.

The outbreak of the military conflict in Ukraine in 2022 caused a mass influx of foreigners to the territory of the Slovak Republic, which significantly affected the labor market and the need for employers to immediately reflect on this situation.

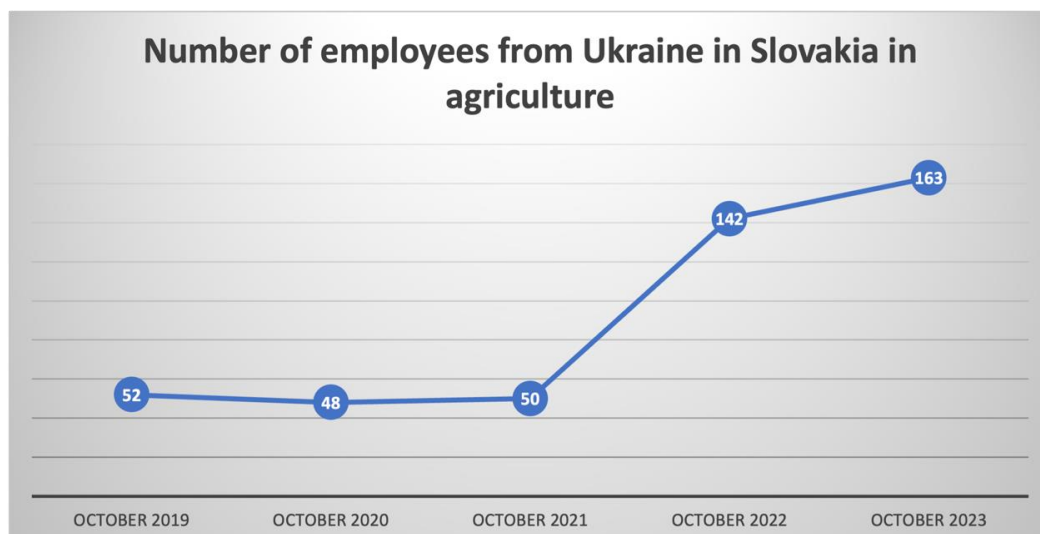
Figure 3 represents a high increase in the number of citizens of Ukraine who were employed on the territory of the Slovak Republic in 2022 after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. Employers were able to provide labor opportunities to migrants from Ukraine through a simplified process thanks to the status of temporary refuge. Slovakia provided better access to information to migrants from Ukraine, so that is that migrants could get to relevant information and suitable job offers according to their professional knowledge and abilities as quickly as possible.

Figure 3 Employment of citizens of EU/EEA countries on the territory of the Slovak Republic.



Source: (Ústredie práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny, 2023)

Figure 4 Employment of citizens of third countries with an information card (without an employment permit) on the territory of the Slovak Republic according to the profession



Source: (Ústredie práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny, 2023)

Figure 4 is a representation of employed citizens of Ukraine on the territory of the Slovak Republic according to their profession - agriculture, forestry and fishing. As we can see in the picture, from 2019 to the present, the number of employees in agrifood companies in Slovakia has increased significantly. It follows that agrifood companies provide labor opportunities to migrants more and more, which can also mean a great competitive advantage for them and an improvement of their market position and image for consumers.

Conclusion

Globalization and many other worldwide aspects have caused the movement of migrants around the world. Based on the processed literature review, we found out that in recent years, more and more migrants are increasing, who are leaving their countries for various reasons. During the current trade, this number has increased by several thousand migrants, due to the covid-19 pandemic and the current situation in Ukraine. The whole of Europe and Slovakia has adapted to these situations and provided appropriate measures. Many new positions and offers have been created on the labor market in all sectors, especially in the agri-food sector. Slovak agri-food companies support and provide labor opportunities for migrants, especially in the fields of agriculture, forestry and fishing. Many measures and activities that companies offer and present can be part of corporate social responsibility and are essential for the company's ethnic marketing. Consumers are often influenced by marketing communication and various activities of companies, so it is important that businesses correctly and effectively present the activities they provide to these minorities. It can create a better image and overall better position of agrifood companies in Slovakia, but also in Europe.

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