

Building a prevention network
against labor exploitation of seasonal workers in Northern Italy.

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ABSTRACT:

The exploitation of agricultural labor is a growing phenomenon in Europe. In Italy, current legislative efforts have improved countermeasures. However, structural change and prevention efforts are needed. This chapter focuses on the potential of network development to transform structural causes of issues by connecting the systems involved. The empirical base of this work draws from transdisciplinary research in EU-funded project FARM, aimed at building up a preventive network against agricultural labor exploitation in Northern Italy.

KEYWORDS:

Labor exploitation, agriculture, seasonal workers, networks, transdisciplinary research.

ARTICLE:

<U1> Introduction:

Recent studies have highlighted how vulnerabilities of migrant workforce in agriculture are a key component of the discussion on the agriculture-migration nexus (King et al. 2021). Severe exploitation of agricultural labor is a growing phenomenon in Europe, and in Italy (OPR 2020). Current legislative efforts (Law199/2016) have successfully improved countermeasures. However, structural transformation and prevention efforts are not yet systematically and widely implemented. Considering the complex factors which enable labor exploitation in agriculture, no isolated actor can enact sustainable change.

This chapter focuses on the preventive potential of network development that seek to transform structural causes of labor exploitation by connecting the variety of systems that influence the dynamics of agricultural labor (Blay-Palmer et al. 2016, Richter 2019, Clark 2021). The empirical base of this work draws from transdisciplinary research in project FARM - Chain of Responsible Agriculture, (<https://www.project-farm.eu/>), in four territories of Northern Italy: the regions of Veneto and Lombardia, and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano. The project had the objective of building up prevention networks against labor exploitation in agriculture.

The methodology is based on a broad literature review, a stakeholder analysis, 30 interviews with partners and relevant stakeholders, as well as targeted questionnaires, collaborative fieldwork with social workers, iterative discussions and dialogue with practitioners involved in anti-trafficking work as well as with a variety of stakeholders, comprising public authorities, labor agencies, law enforcement agencies, labor unions, cooperatives, agricultural unions, and third sector organizations. Qualitative data was introduced and analyzed in MaxQDA. Elements of analysis were constantly revised in an iterative dialogue with partners and stakeholders throughout the research process, making them not only sources or users of information, but involving them as co-creators of knowledge in processes of question setting, secondary data gathering as well as data interpretation.

<U1> Severe labor exploitation: definitions and figures.

Severe labor exploitation belongs to the group of phenomena included in umbrella terms such as “trafficking in human beings” or “modern slavery”, along with sexual exploitation, enforced criminality, domestic servitude and various other. As defined by the European Council (2005) in Art. 4 of the Warsaw Conference:

<Zitat> "Trafficking in human beings" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

Labor exploitation is declined in different levels of severity, to the extent that work conditions deviate from legal standards of decent work, reaching the extremes of coercion and slavery (ILO 2021). *Severe forms of labor exploitation* are defined by the Fundamental Rights Agency as “work situations that deviate significantly from standard working conditions as defined by legislation (...) of the EU Member State where the exploitation occurs”, especially concerning the areas of “remuneration, working hours, leave entitlements, health and safety standards and decent treatment” (FRA 2019a). The Italian framework document (MLPS 2020) includes these aspects in defining *conditions of labor exploitation*, adding to them the violation of contract law and illicit intermediation of workforce. When conditions of exploitation are imposed on persons in vulnerable situations or under coercion, it constitutes *forced labor*.

The *Atlas of Enslavement* by Rosa-Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS 2021) documents new forms of slavery as a growing global phenomenon, reporting that in Europe, despite the fact that “hundreds of thousands of persons -many of them migrants- are being exploited” (p.50), anti-trafficking measures have significantly regressed in the last 10 years (p.49). ILO has estimated that in 2016, 25 million people were victims of forced labor at a global scale, 25% of which were children. Only in Europe and Central Asia, 4.2 million children are involved in forced labor, from which 77% in agriculture, and 38% in the youngest age group reported, from 5 to 11 years (ILO/Walk Free Foundation 2017).

Labor exploitation in Italy is increasingly documented, especially in agriculture, in the textile industry, in construction, commerce and logistics¹. The fifth report *Agromafie e Caporalato*, estimates about 180,000 gravely exploited workers in Italian agriculture in 2019 (OPR 2020, p.188). Migrant women, increasingly employed in agriculture, are exposed to additional duress by being subjected to sexual harassment and violence on top of labor exploitation.

<U1> Going to the roots: structural context and legal frames in the Italian case

<U2> Structural context

The Covid-19 pandemic has rendered even more visible the essential role of food supply for a functional society. There are, however, inequalities in food access (Oxfam 2021), to severe unbalances in the placement of value throughout the food production chains (Neef 2020, Benton 2020). The accentuation of pre-existing poverty rates and economic inequalities in Italy applies also to the agricultural sector, where the wealth accumulation of those who hold the distribution power grows on the backs of exploited workers, often deprived of basic labor rights and protections. The expansion of industrialized agriculture has reconfigured the Italian food production field, incorporating smaller farms into larger and intensive production systems, and pressuring localities through globalized

¹ See <https://www.osservatoriointerventitratta.it/osservatorio-sfruttamento-lavorativo-2020/>

market competition. Intermediaries and distribution chains create production pressures using negotiation power to impose conditions and lower prices on the agriculture, operating an unequal distribution of risks and costs.

Labor becomes increasingly stratified, as the agricultural systems of depopulated rural areas reserve secure contracts for few local employees, while subcontracting the non-specialized labor tasks to migrants in vulnerable situations, for wage dumping. The Italian agricultural sector has seen a significant growth in immigrant workers in the last decade, especially regarding seasonal and less qualified activities (CREA 2020, p. 34-44). Work conditions appear especially harsh for undocumented migrants, as recent changes in immigration policies have made it harder to obtain a residence permit that allows access to regular work, and have abolished some types of permit, pushing tens of thousands into undocumented status. Oxfam Italy reports that among the difficulties specific to immigrants highlighted dramatically by the pandemic, the most serious concerned people holding those residence permits that were abolished by Law No. 132/2018. This law, also known as “Decreto Salvini”, in fact contained the abolition of residence permits for humanitarian protection, and other such measures, which caused it to be immediately identified by EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency as one of the “Key fundamental rights concerns” emerging in Europe at the time (FRA 2019 b).

ILO identifies numerous reasons for a greater vulnerability of migrants to exploitation: a precarious social and juridical position that makes them subject to forms of blackmail, the absence of a safety net, family responsibilities in the country of origin, travel debt to be repaid, scarcity of reliable information sources, isolation especially in domestic or agricultural work, not perceiving themselves as victims of exploitation, as well as fear². Legal status insecurity contributes to deteriorate work conditions, shaping forms of physical risk, precarious work and unhealthy environments, amidst the “normalization of migrant farmworker injury” and “living conditions that slowly and regularly harm those who provide us with our food” (Holmes 2019). Migrant workers thus experience a decreased labour agency, “defined as the worker’s ability to act and improve their conditions” (Gansemans and D’Haese 2019).

The agricultural labor market has a time-sensitive functioning, linked to seasonal and weather conditions. Time management in labor provision can make a great difference in the quality and price of the final product and thus in the profitability of the enterprise. Legal intermediation channels, both public and private, oftentimes struggle to be able to provide workforce with the intermittent rhythms required by perishable crops. Ilicit intermediaries provide low-wage and timely agricultural workforce, by pressuring exploited migrants into harsh productive rhythms. It has been observed that “the seasonality of the growing and picking periods, the just-in-time need to deliver the required quantities to given markets, and the long and intense daily rhythms of physically draining labour, all conspire to shape the highly time-controlled lives of the migrant workers” (King et al. 2021, p. 54).

Controlling institutions experience difficulties enacting inspections in agriculture. The variability of time and place of labor as well as procedural obstacles render inspections harder in the agricultural workplace: it is located on private lands, often in different provinces than the enterprise’s legal office, as declared on the paperwork. There are communication obstacles, as supervising institutions often do not have the linguistic and cultural skills to communicate effectively with immigrant workers. The seclusion and the informality of wide areas of rural labor markets enable irregular practices and provide cover to exploitative conditions.

In its three-year plan to address labor exploitation (MLPS 2020), the Ministry of Labor indicates that contractual irregularity (comprised of partially or totally undeclared or misrepresented work) is pervasive in the agricultural sector, affecting as much as 50% of workers. Even though many workers in irregular situations feel grateful for the opportunity to work at all, the unobserved economy created by irregularity does not only deprive the state of taxes, but also harms workers themselves, who are

² See https://italy.iom.int/sites/italy/files/news-documents/Schedan.1_Vulnerabilit%C3%A0.pdf

robbed of social security, can no longer receive agricultural unemployment benefits, are not adequately insured against accidents and illness among other social protections.

<U2> Caporalato: contextualized labor exploitation in the Italian agriculture.

Labor exploitation in the Italian context is associated with the concept of *caporalato*, which sums up a variety of forms of *gang mastery* and illicit intermediation of the labor force in the agricultural sector. Perrotta (2015) reconstructs the historical origins of this practice and gives a scope of its diversification, showing that despite it represents a codified crime since 1919, it is the main form of intermediation of agricultural labor in Southern Italy, and increasingly present in the North, albeit in more covert forms. The *caporale* is a labor force broker who intermediates the distance between the social milieu of agricultural entrepreneurs and workers in vulnerable situations, especially when there is a structural need of mobilizing and organizing teams of seasonal workers in the short term and at low cost. Profiting from the recruitment of people in vulnerable situations, *caporali* provide the needed service of quick worker availability, locating themselves in the voids of the system, applying innovation and resourcefulness to their criminal enterprise (Elsen/Fazzi 2021 b, 2020).

The caporalato system applies mafia-style operational patterns, creating physical and symbolic forms of power to control the workforce (Palmisano 2017, p.18). It has been argued that, albeit it is linked to human trafficking, mafias and organized crime, these phenomena not always coincide: not all *caporali* have effective ties to mafia organizations, nor they all exercise physical violence as means of persuasion. In fact, Palmisano (2017, p. 18-19) calls the caporale “an ideal type of the new slaver”, as it exerts its force more frequently in the form of blackmail, by establishing a monopoly on the access to work, than in the form of physical violence. Exploited workers not always know their legal entitlements, nor feel defrauded. Minding the gradients in the use of force and in the vulnerability of its targets, *caporalato* is so embedded as a practice in some Italian agricultural contexts that despite its overt defiance of human rights and legislation, for marginalized immigrants it constitutes a pathway to work and even a “model of social ascent” (Perrotta 2015, p. 19) in which exploited laborers in turn can learn to subject and exploit others, becoming themselves *caporali*. In time, some accumulate and invest a variety of social, linguistic and organizational skills to constitute themselves as exploitative brokers of seasonal workers.

<U2> The Stra-Berry case in Milan³

Despite the fact that the phenomenon of *caporalato* has originally been observed in the southern Italian regions, its absence in the northern wealthy and advanced agricultural economies has been refuted. In fact, on 260 judicial proceedings the center has monitored, 143, more than half, are not located in southern regions, and most highly impacted areas include northern regions as Veneto and Lombardia (OPR 2020, p. 135).

One of such cases, *Operation “Corsa contro il tempo” (Race against time)* refers to a strawberry production company in Lombardia, which despite having received twice a prize for innovation by Coldiretti, it was later discovered to enact conditions of grave labor exploitation. The impoverished workers were forced to work for free for two full “test days” and if hired, they were not paid their dues according to collective contracts. Workers did not have access to drinking water, bathrooms, or showers, and were constantly under harsh surveillance. They applied chemical products on berries without the required license or any protective devices.

The wide press coverage of this case is due to the fact that it countered common misconceptions about labor exploitation in Italy. Firstly, that *caporali* are immigrants who exploit their own compatriots. The StraBerry case gave a very different image, when its owner, Guglielmo Stagno D’Alcontes, a graduate from the prestigious Bocconi University in Milan, who was awarded by Coldiretti a prize for innovation, was caught by wiretap bragging about using on-call contracts as an instrument of

³ Sources in this section were extracted and translated from official juridical proceedings.

blackmail, “working in a tribal style”, “being the dominant male” by applying “coercive methods”. Secondly, that what European laws considers exploitation only amounts to harsher work conditions, that are normalized in the country of origin of immigrant workers, and that’s why they accept them. In this case, the victim’s testimony paints a picture that is hard to normalize:

<Zitat> *«I worked two days for 10 hours, it was considered a test-run without pay, to see if you were fast, so that they may give you the job. (...) There are no toilets, I had to go on the field. There are no showers, there was a faucet used to drink, but it was forbidden to use it to wash, we had to do that in the stream. We ate on the floor. (...) They never gave me a payslip, I asked for it more than once. (...) I asked for the rest of my pay (...) he shouted at my face that we are miserable Africans that have nothing, and he pushed me violently, trying to throw me out of the office, yelling and spitting on my face».*

Finally, it countered the idea that labor exploitation in agriculture is a problem located in the South, in impoverished and low-technology settings. Not certainly involving the innovative carts selling berries in Milan, “cultivated 15 km. from the Duomo” as their marketing announced. Media portrayed the grave exploitation happening in the economic center of the nation, as a “radical chic shame”. The owner along with 6 collaborators are under trial for aggravated labor exploitation, and the enterprise was seized by the judicial authorities and forced under public administration to re-establish humane and legal work conditions.

<U2> Improvement and limitations of legal remedies

In 2016, Italian legislation (Law 199/2016) has redefined the contours of what constitutes *caporalato*, *illicit intermediation and exploitation of labor* in the national Penal Code (Art.603-bis) and reframed its indicators. The law contains both **countering measures** (e.g. to enable punishment of intermediaries even in absence of violence, and of exploiting employers even in absence of illicit intermediation), as well as **protection to the exploited victims** (e.g. to extend protections to undocumented workers and asylum seekers, to include victims of labor exploitation in protective pathways previously reserved to trafficked victims⁴, and to allow in certain cases the confiscation of means of production, including a temporary judicial control and administration of the agricultural enterprise), and **preventive measures** (e.g. the enhancement of the Quality Agricultural Work Network, whose aim is to certify and recognize the ethical and legal practices of enterprises). The law has brought immediate results in countering labor exploitation by enabling an increase in law enforcement and judicial actions, but preventive measures have not yet found such swift and wide application.

The stakeholder analysis shows that since Law 199/2016 went into effect, law enforcement agencies have strongly activated, uncovering cases of grave labor exploitation in Northern Italy as well. The legal remedies of the law have been a necessary first step, but Italian jurists convene that better legislation is still needed, as well as a regulation of labor market and a social security system in agriculture that keeps up with change in this sector.

<U1> Building structures by participative research: Project FARm

<U2> Overview of the project

Project FARm *Filiera dell’Agricoltura Responsabile* (chain of responsible agriculture), reaches beyond the juridical space, into the social space, to activate a preventive network that is focused on social transformation. This action-research project includes creating both collaborative knowledge and

⁴ Building on art. 18 of the previous law Dlgs 286/1998, the Presidency of the Ministry Council has established in 2003 an Anti-trafficking Fund to protect and assist the victims of grave crimes against a person, such as human trafficking, alienation and slavery, through the three pillars: a) emersion b) identification and first assistance and c) social inclusion. The law 199/2016 has extended such protections to victims of illicit intermediation and labor exploitation.

concerted interventions between a variety of scientific disciplines, among the various actors involved in agricultural productive chains, as well as in coordination with social, economic, and political stakeholders, activating operational connections for the prevention of labor exploitation.

Project FARm, active in the regions of Veneto, Lombardia and Trentino Alto-Adige, has been co-funded by the European Union within the FAMI fund (*Fondo Asilo e Migrazione*) through the national ministries of Labor and Internal Affairs. Headed by Verona University, it is conducted by a consortium of four universities, located in each of the territories involved, where they coordinate with numerous local partners research and interventions, each leading one of 4 main topics which articulate the scientific scope:

- 1) **Emergence** of situations of vulnerability to forms of labor exploitation, through training and specialized support to outreach units, as well as information campaigns.
- 2) **Inclusion**, as social protection of those at risk of exploitation, favouring a better access to services of active inclusion, physical and psychological wellbeing, and pathways to occupation.
- 3) **Intermediation** of agricultural labor, through innovative legal, organizational, and technological solutions linking public and private actors that support connection between offer and demand.
- 4) **Self-regulation** of agricultural enterprises and implementation of the law on the Quality Agricultural Labor Network, which aims to promote dignity and legality in work conditions.

<U2> Transdisciplinary co-construction of knowledge

The project consolidated a synergy between academics and practice partners, enabling the co-construction of research and interventions, as has been elsewhere described in greater detail (Zadra/Viganò/Elsen 2022). For example, for social workers engaging in prevention, it has been valuable to access academic knowledge pools, to inform their interventions with a more detailed context analysis. Involving partners and stakeholders, in turn helps researchers make sense of the contextualized data on local agricultural production structures and labor demand, collective contracts conditions, migration fluxes in the area, accessibility of social protections and affordable housing, public and private labor intermediation systems and more.

The value of such transdisciplinary synergy was especially visible during joint missions, in which researchers shadowed anti-trafficking operatives in the field, participating in their outreach work. In one of these missions, researchers had the chance to talk with a *caporale*, an illegal intermediary who explained in plain terms the workings of his activity. On another outing, a representative of a Sikh community explained the mechanisms by which transnational relations and power dynamics within the ethnic group facilitated a regular flow of labor from India to the milk production sector in Lombardia.

Moreover, anti-trafficking organizations developed contextualized knowledge pools, by enacting different forms of research in their localities. University researchers were then mobilized as *scientific enablers* in such data gathering initiatives: structured questionnaires targeting beneficiaries or operators in reception centers, ethnographic observation and mapping of meeting points in agricultural fields, farmers' markets, recruiting or distribution sites, photographic reports, guided visits to ethnic and religious communities among targeted populations, interviews with local stakeholders and potential beneficiaries, and more. The resulting data was instrumental in producing targeted reports, shaping interventions, as well as drawing comparisons.

<U2> Cultivating the ground: participative professional development

One of the objectives for an effective *emersion* of labor exploitation in project FARm is the professional training of outreach workers. Most of them have built their expertise in contexts of sexual exploitation, and required a reflexive professional space to adapt their skills, networks, and knowledge to respond to the specific context of the exploitation of agricultural labor.

The first training packages offered to outreach workers by Universities offered knowledge about the evolving legal framework, labor contracts and protections in agriculture, safety and health regulations, early detection of mental health issues, and more. Progressively, the top-down approach subsided, leaving space to more participative processes of knowledge construction, which enabled knowledge circulation to be reciprocal and better targeted. **Case studies** were discussed with juridical researchers using a *flipped classroom* method that allowed the elaboration of multiple points of view on cases.

A **participative workshop** was organized for the co-construction of a methodology of outreach work towards persons at risk of exploitation, adapting the *world-café technique* to the digital space imposed by Covid restrictions. The workshop aimed at gathering the expertise of the anti-trafficking partners and consolidating the community of practice by enabling the creation of common platforms, languages, instruments and practices. The collective of practitioners took ownership of the knowledge production process, and were surprised by the variety, quality, and depth of the knowledge they collectively possessed. The workshop was followed by a program of **reciprocal training**, where each organization illustrated their processes of construction of interventions. Participants valued the acquisition of replicable best practices, but also the transparency with which outreach workers shared their trial-and-error processes. The process resulted in the joint production of a final research report on outreach methods for labor exploitation prevention as well as guidelines for practitioners.

<U2> Widening the prevention network to local stakeholders in South Tyrol:

The development of preventive networks required embedding in specific local contexts, gaining understanding of local structures and connecting with a wide range of local stakeholders. The autonomous province of South Tyrol has high levels of legislative, administrative, and fiscal autonomy. It is a multilingual context, where the German linguistic group consists of more than 70% of the total population, especially concentrated in rural agricultural areas, while urban centers are more culturally diverse. The peculiarity of its structural economies, institutional relations, and social stratification processes, as well as its symbolic and cultural dynamics, render this land unique, hardly comparable to other Italian regions. The mountain agricultural economy has succeeded in slowing the rate of decline of small family farms (2-4 ha.) by generous public support in funding, training, and policy (APB 2020). The *maso chiuso* policy (Provincial Laws 17/28.11.2001 and 5/19.04.2018) has protected family farms from fragmentation, by regulating inheritance processes to maintain land productivity. With small farms historically embedded in valley communities and traditionally organized in cooperatives, comes a higher level of social control. Unlike neighbouring regions, there has been no proven cases of caporalato in the province.

However, such embeddedness of agricultural enterprises in the favor of local government implies the risk of an undue influence of political interests in the consistency and priorities of control activities, as well as an extreme asymmetry in negotiating labor conditions. In fact, labor unions shared the impression that agricultural organizations “*come to negotiations aware of the fact that they have enormous power, that their interests are strongly politically represented (...) it’s like a rubber wall, bouncing off every demand we present*” (Interview with a Labor Union, 04.06.2020).

Irregularities are also widespread. All labor unions documented the widespread practice of undeclared or partially declared working hours of seasonal workers in South Tyrol. Two law enforcement agencies interviewed concurred: "As a result of more than 100 inspections carried out by the Finance Police Units of the Province of Bolzano during the grape harvest and apple picking, 70 workers were discovered to be illegally employed, of which 52 were completely illegal. Approximately one in four companies was found to be employing illegal workers" (Press release of the Guardia di Finanza, 01.12.2021). This result is consistent with evidence from previous years: in 37 out of 152 controls operated by the Guardia di Finanza of the Region of Trentino Alto-Adige from September 2019 to November 2020, a total of 114 completely undeclared workers and 14 irregularly employed workers were identified. In the year 2018, 5 cases of illicit intermediation were found in the Region (Questionnaire to Guardia di Finanza, 02.02.2021). A preventive network could make a difference for the fifteen thousand seasonal workers coming each year from abroad, mainly from Eastern Europe,

being hosted by their employers within the farm for the duration of the harvest, physically and linguistically isolated, with no clear knowledge of their legal rights or local safety regulations.

Starting from a local stakeholder analysis and documentation, the first round of interviews in South Tyrol targeted partners from anti-trafficking organizations. Then, practitioners from those organizations joined researchers in interviewing stakeholders, to enable the development of collaborations. In this way, practitioners were able to pick up relevant context information to target their interventions, and brought their contextualized experience to the discussion. The interview process allowed to grasp local features that were not present in the available literature. Practitioners were also able to develop collaborations and joint interventions, e.g., with labor unions, which were involved in the training of workers of reception centers about labor rights in agriculture or with a law-enforcement agency which assigned to outreach workers a high-ranking liaison to formalize referral channels and discuss emerging cases.

The next step in the development of the local network in South Tyrol was a stakeholder dialogue on the social quality of agricultural labor in South Tyrol, which engaged actors from public and private institutions, as well as the third sector. By respecting the different functions, positions and priorities of the stakeholders, researchers aim to contribute to overcome the fragmentation of discourses, granting each actor the possibility to participate on a plain field that is not linked to negotiation dynamics. The position and credibility of the University enables the creation of a secure space where less powerful voices can be heard, and knowledge can circulate. Such “power to convene” (Clark et al. 2021) can mobilize actors and resources to influence power asymmetries and governance arrangements, by integrating and coordinating various points of view and building a systems-oriented vision. Eventually, a vision statement on agricultural fair labor in South Tyrol was reached, with the contribution of all relevant local stakeholders. It identified strength factors, room for growth and proposed preventive measures against labor exploitation.

In the different territories of project FARM, preventive initiatives were negotiated with stakeholders: professionalizing education programs for agricultural workers, training of labor intermediation agencies on accessibility for persons in vulnerable situations, low-threshold information hubs to services, from language learning to healthcare, and a multilingual information guide. The responsiveness and imagination of both researchers and operational partners to the context they were uncovering step by step, unfolded initiatives and connections that were impossible to plan or predict. This is part of what we call *generating structures by research*.

<U1> Conclusion: Networks of concerted social change

A retooling is in order, to innovate towards a socially responsible, sustainable and resilient rural space, as has been showcased (Elsen 2019, Elsen/Fazzi 2021 a, 2021 b, Zadra/ Elsen 2021, Zadra/Viganò/Elsen 2022). This contribution has addressed labor exploitation in Northern Italy, describing it not in a void but as embedded in multiple social systems. It has identified factors in such systems which contribute to generate risk conditions for labor exploitation: high demand of cheap agricultural labor following price pressures by gross distribution systems, ineffective public intermediation in agricultural labor markets, loose regulation of flexible contracts which allow exploiters to use them as blackmail instruments, high threshold public services and social protections, lacking control mechanisms and immigration laws which determine a structural vulnerability of undocumented migrants, among others.

Knickel et al. observed that “there is a particular need to strengthen transdisciplinary research that can better inform public and private sector decision-making at all levels” adding that integrating “context-sensitive knowledge with formal scientific knowledge, and fostering co-learning approaches, will be a critically important step in triggering systemic change” (Knickel et al. 2017, p. 11-13). This work has documented such an attempt. It argues that the implementation of preventive structures against labor-exploitation requires to take into consideration the multiplicity of actors in the field that may

contribute to its origins and its solutions. A process of co-constructing knowledge that is locally embedded and trans-locally compared, as project FARm, has shown to be valuable in identifying clusters of vulnerability to exploitation of migrant labor in specific agricultural contexts and implementing targeted action for social change.

Complex problems require concerted interventions. The FARm project network, centered on exploitation prevention, has reciprocally connected actors related to the *emersion* process (anti-trafficking outreach and law enforcement) to *inclusion* initiatives (labor unions, social and health services), to *intermediation* channels (low-threshold training and labor placement agencies, public and private) and to *self-regulation* of enterprises (social agriculture initiatives, fair labor cooperatives, etc.). Preventive connections have taken different forms: case-based mediation, reciprocal training, knowledge sharing, joint field interventions, negotiated declarations, among others. Such connections have enhanced in the organizations involved the access to specialized knowledge about the problem and the understanding of the different positions, resources and limitations of other agencies operating in this field.

We conclude arguing that an effective prevention system against labor exploitation should be developed through an integrative multi-actor, multi-sector, and multi-layer approach to network creation.

Multiactor, because the problem originates in relations between multiple subjects within and outside of the agricultural productive chain. This implies creating meaningful connections between various actors and allowing for various kinds of resources and knowledge to circulate. It also entails shifting current power asymmetries to allow spaces for disempowered voices to be heard. This is easier said than done. It must start by overcoming the silo mentality that creates fragmentation, by acknowledging other actors that operate in the field, getting to know their mandate, resources, priorities, connections, and interests.

Multisector, because the problem of labor exploitation goes beyond agriculture, to other economic sectors as construction, domestic work, and tourism. The roots of the problem are complex and embedded in the current economic, political, juridical, and social structures. Therefore, the actors who participate in the prevention network should be able to connect throughout different sectors, and build a common understanding of the problem. This can be challenging, amidst significant contextual difference, as well as great diversity in the mandates, perspectives, and priorities of institutions.

Multi-level, to overcome contradictions between different scales of governance or economic pressure, when building preventive knowledge and interventions. As of governance, in Italy, inclusive laws at the national level may be met by local authorities who avoid taking any effective steps. Otherwise, local initiatives of inclusion might find extremely slow response at the national level. Ambrosini describes the contradictions of multilevel governance in Italian migration policy as a *battleground* (2021). In project FARm, local pushback to the national discourse on labor exploitation was a challenge, eventually overcome by reaching compromises in a joint local vision statement on Fair Labor. On the economic side, the Southtyrolean farmers union has described the complexities of price control by relating the local or national dimension (e.g., the area's weather conditions), with the European or global context (e.g., fluctuations in supply and demand of apples on the global markets) (Interview with Farmers Union 25-06.2020).

During project FARm we have also experienced how research and development involving a variety of actors is a resource to comprehend the roots and manifestations of the problem of labor exploitation in agriculture, and to address it by creating preventive networks which generate preventive structures for persons in vulnerable situations. Transdisciplinary research can generate social innovation by creating synergies between knowledge generation efforts and social change efforts, provided researchers learn to navigate the complexity of the context they are embedding into.

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