

These COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots are designed to capture the latest information and analysis in a fast-moving environment. Topics will be repeated from time to time as analysis develops. If you have an item to include, please email us at research@iom.int.

Global food supply depends on millions of migrant workers. In many countries, especially in developed economies, migrant workers play a critical role in agriculture and food production. By some estimates, [more than a fourth](#) of global farm work is done by migrant workers. Countries such as the United States, Germany, Australia, Canada, Spain, among others heavily rely on seasonal migrant workers to fill labour shortages in their agricultural sectors and to sustain food production. COVID-19 is already having an impact on migrant farm workers and, consequently, [affecting food production and supply](#).



COVID-19 disruptions to seasonal migrant work for harvesting

Restrictions on movement, including border closures, have left some countries unable to access much-needed farm labour, [leaving food unharvested and even left to rot](#). Across Western Europe, in countries such as Italy, France and Germany, seasonal workers traditionally from Eastern Europe [are absent on farms](#), as travel restrictions have rendered them immobile. COVID-19-related travel restrictions and illness are estimated to result in [a shortage 80,000 agricultural workers](#) in the UK, while Spain has a [shortage](#) of around 70,000-80,000 workers and Italy 250,000.

As countries grapple with acute labour shortages in their agricultural sectors, some have extended seasonal work visas or eased entry requirements for migrant seasonal workers. Australia, which relies on thousands of seasonal workers mostly from Pacific Islands, [extended](#) seasonal work visas to ensure harvesting, while the United States [eased requirements](#) for seasonal farm workers to avoid labour shortages during the pandemic and as the country goes into harvest period. Germany has also [eased border rules](#) to allow migrant farm workers to enter the country. Meanwhile, in the UK, travel restrictions and shutdowns have forced farmers to [charter planes](#) to bring in migrant workers.



Migrants play a substantial role in agri-food systems.

Measures affecting the movement of people (internally and internationally) and resulting labour shortages will have an impact on agricultural value chains, affecting food availability and market prices globally.”

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations ([FAO](#))



Globalisation & food crops

Recent research shows that, globally, we are now more connected in culinary terms than ever before. A study of crop origins has found that the most important primary regions of diversity contributing to a country's modern food system are more often located elsewhere around the planet ([Khoury et al., 2016](#)).

[World Migration Report 2020](#)



Exacerbating food insecurity

As COVID-19 impacts food production, including by disrupting the supply of migrant farm workers, there are concerns that it could [lead to food insecurity](#) and exacerbate these insecurities in already vulnerable communities such as those already grappling with hunger and malnutrition. Countries in Africa could be hit hard, as the continent [accounts for most of the 212 million](#) people who are chronically food insecure. The potential for increased food prices combined with limited purchasing power make many countries in the region especially vulnerable to food insecurity. Meanwhile, countries that [heavily depend on food imports](#), such as small island developing states, could struggle to meet their food supplies.

Farm workers' protection

Many [commentators](#) are highlighting the need to protect farm workers, including seasonal migrants, as essential workers during the pandemic. [PPE](#), testing, health services access and ensuring their labour [rights](#) are upheld are some of the measures being called for. Protection of vulnerable groups, including migrants, is central to the [UN response to COVID-19](#).



Migrant farm workers at increased risk

Many migrant farm workers are at an increased risk of being infected with COVID-19, which could not only threaten their lives but also put global food supply at risk. For most, social isolation is nearly impossible, as they often both live [and work in very close proximity](#) to one another. Migrant farm workers living in [crowded camps with poor sanitation](#) are even more vulnerable to the disease and there is growing concern that COVID-19 could [spread rapidly](#) if it hits these environments. Many migrant farm workers also often [live in areas with poor transport links and with limited medical facilities](#), while the pre-existing conditions some have, sometimes caused by their working conditions, puts them at greater risk.

In the United States, there are concerns that [fewer people will apply for H-2A visas](#) for temporary agricultural workers, as workers choose to stay in their countries for fear of COVID-19. In parts of Europe, and in countries such as Thailand, thousands of migrant farm workers have [already returned to their countries of origin](#) to avoid the risk of getting the disease.

Internal restrictions on movement are also affecting countries like [India](#) as seasonal farm workers are unable to travel internally during the COVID-19 lockdown.

In a [recent brief](#), the FAO issued a set of policy recommendations in response to the current pandemic and its effect on migrant workers, including those who work in agricultural sectors. These include extending expiring visas of migrants working in all agricultural sub-sectors, ensuring the safe movement of agricultural workers and ensuring that safety and health measures are put in place, among others. Read more [here](#).

This COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot has been produced by [IOM Research](#) (research@iom.int).

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