ETH Zurich Department of Architecture
ARCHITECTURE OF TERRITORY
Chair of Architecture
and Territorial Planning
Professor Milica Topalović

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Agricultural Labour

Invisible Labour in Agriculture: Local Products With(out) Fair Work

Silvie Frei and Marko Mrcarica

The increasing pace of globalisation has shown implications on Swiss agriculture. The pressure on farms is high due to competition with an international market. As consequence, the production costs are cut wherever possible, resulting in low wages for agricultural labour and high working hours. One wonders, what kind of person is actually willing to work under such tough conditions?

Invisible Labour

A seasonal workers car parked in front of
a storage hall of Beerstecher AG in Dübendorf.

Everyday Life of a Seasonal Worker on a Swiss Farm

Certain crops such as asparagus must be harvested very carefully and are labour intensive. Harvesting is mainly manual work as it can only be replaced by machines to a certain extent. The work is physically demanding and requires stamina. The daily working hours are long while the hard work in the field is underpaid. For the majority of Swiss citizens such working conditions in the field are undesirable.

What many Swiss citizen are not aware of, is that quite a number of farmers replace the missing Swiss labor force with seasonal workers from abroad. This dependence on seasonal labour has remained invisible to the public eye.

Harvesting asparagus is very time-consuming and must be done manually.

Two cars of seasonal workers parked in a shed used for storage and housing at Beerstecher AG, Zurich.

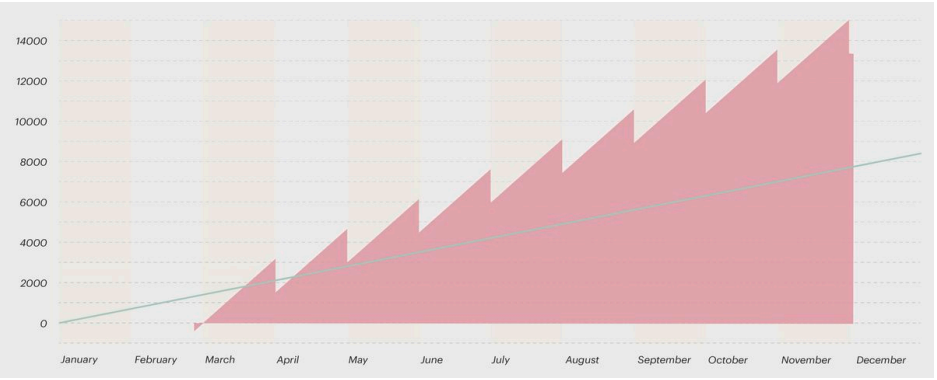
Fine line between after-work hours and working time at Beerstecher AG, Zurich.

Greenhouses belonging to Beerstecher AG
with agricultural labour in the background.

The daily work routine of agricultural labour is challenging. The average seasonal worker gets up at 5 o'clock. Work is calling and there is no time for an extensive breakfast for strengthening. Every day except Sunday the working day lasts at least until half past 6 in the evening, usually longer during high season. According to the employment contract, a seasonal worker works 5.5 days a week. In fact it is usually 6.5 days. Since the ambition of seasonal labour is to send as much money as possible to the family in the home country, one is willing to work overtime. This gets charged additionally, but only if the seasonal employee notes it down properly. A requirement, which is often times not communicated by the employer at first.

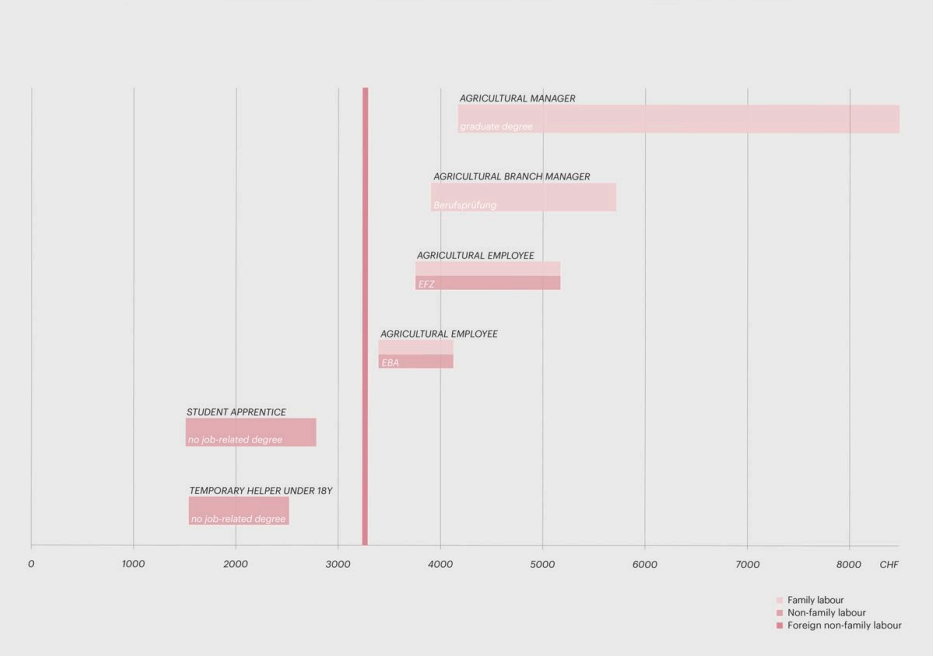
Besides working there is not much free time left. The few hours during which the seasonal labour is not working are spent by sleeping. Its difficult for seasonal workers to establish contacts with people outside the farm, especially with Swiss people. During employment in Switzerland, social contacts are limited to the other agricultural employees. Contact with the family at home are maintained by digital means and with visits during the vacations if the financial means allow it.

"I Don'T Have the Time to Integrate Myself Here in Switzerland Because I Work All the Time. I Don'T Have Any Swiss Friends, Which Makes It Difficult to Learn the German Language." – Petru (Romania)



A possible net wage of a seasonal worker compared to the minimum wage in his home country. The net wage ends up being only around half the gross wage.

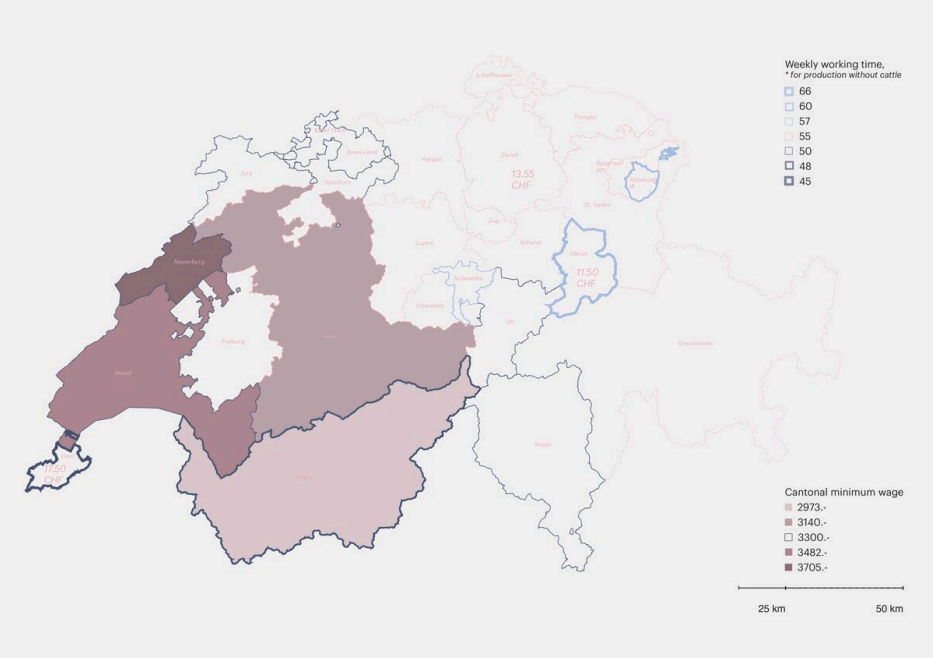
At a weekly rate of 55 hours, significantly more than in other sectors of work (41.5h), a seasonal worker earns a minimum wage of 3300 CHF per month in nearly all cantons. While this is already very low for Swiss standards, the worker never gets to see this sum. The NAV (standard employment contract) obliges the employer to cover the costs of housing, catering, social security, healthcare, AHV and taxes. This results in a net monthly wage of about 1600 CHF on average. Even so for seasonal workers it is still a worthwhile situation. The willingness to work in Switzerland even at this low wage comes from the fact that they still earn more in Switzerland a than at home which is why most seasonal workers return to Switzerland for multiple years since the first employment.



The standard wage of seasonal workers in Switzerland compared to the wages of Swiss agricultural employees of different agricultural degrees.

The minimum wage of 3300 CHF for foreign seasonal labour is just little more than the one of uneducated Swiss temporary workers, even though most foreign labour is educated in agriculture. Is it fair that seasonal workers, who are crucial for Swiss food production, earn less than any agriculturally schooled Swiss employee, although they work just as hard? Although a seasonal worker earns more net income in Switzerland than in their home town, it is fair to call this financial discrimination.

For seasonal labour the employment is an opportunity as economic pressure or unemployment is often high in the home country. One does not dare to complain about wages then. But even if seasonal workers do eventually, they are in a weak negotiating position since there are few to none worker unions in the field willing or able to offer support.



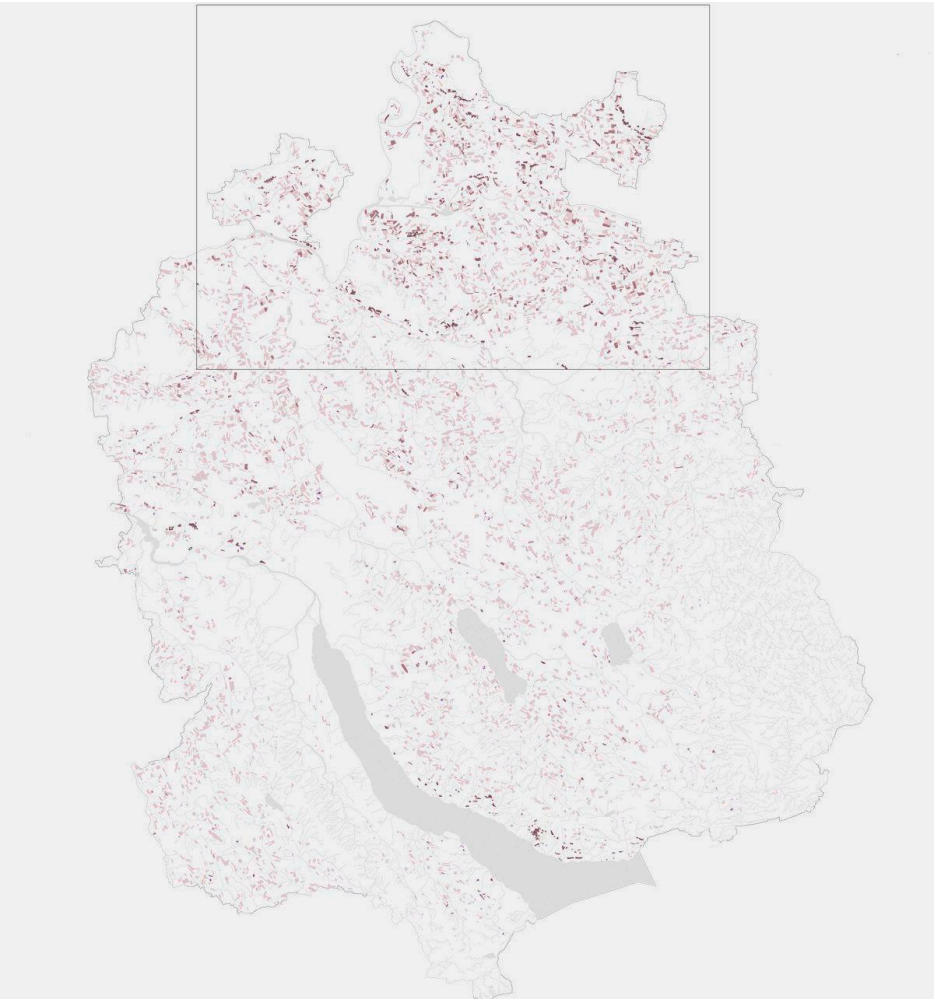
In Swiss agriculture there is no collective labour agreement which results in cantonal differences regarding minimum wages and weekly hours.

In Swiss agriculture there is no collective labour agreement as it is the case in almost all other sectors of work. The hourly wages and working conditions for seasonal workers vary from canton to canton. In general minimum wages and working hours are more generous in the French speaking parts of Switzerland than in the rest of the country. While Geneva has introduced an exemplary hourly wage of CHF 17.50, seasonal labour in the canton of Glarus is paid far too little at CHF 11.50 per hour. The canton of Zurich belongs to the average with an hourly wage of 13.50 gross.

The Dependence of Swiss Farmers on Seasonal Workers

The cultivation of certain crops is labour intensive and dependent on the manpower of seasonal labour. These foreign workers are employed mainly to do the ground work and harvest which is at different times in a year depending on the crop. But they also do logistical work in storage halls and transportation of goods. The tasks they do tend to be varied and depend on the season and the crops grown on the farm. The High season of most crops takes place from May to October.

Seasonal workers are allowed to be employed in Switzerland for a period of three to twelve months a year. Those who stay 90 days or less are “Meldepflichtig” and those who stay up to a year need an L-permit. The latter is more common because especially larger Swiss farms are interested to employ seasonal workers throughout the year, not just during high season. Usually a seasonal worker is employed in Switzerland for six to nine months.

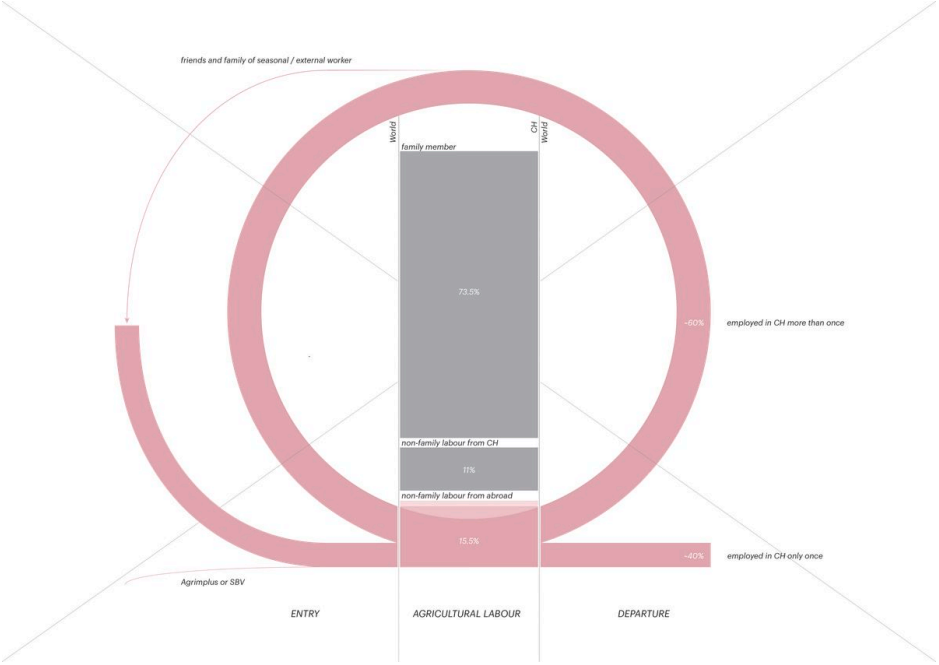


Vegetable farms (red), fruit farms (purple) and viniculture (dark red) are the most labour intensive types of agriculture in Switzerland and therefore hire the most seasonal workers. In the canton of Zurich these types of farms are concentrated in the Zürcher Weinland.

In Switzerland there is little statistical information available on seasonal workers in agriculture. Neither the federal government nor the cantons seem to have much interest collecting that information. Agrimpuls, a service of the Swiss farmers' union guesses that 30'000 to 35'000 seasonal workers are employed in Swiss agriculture every year but there is no exact data. Precise figures and data on duration of stay of seasonal workers are hardly available.

"Official numbers on how many seasonal Workers are employed in Swiss Agriculture do not exist, since the cutoff day for statistics is at the beginning of the year. Which is when seasonal labour is not in Switzerland." – Monika Schatzmann, head of Agrimpuls

Due to the temporary nature of work and the lack of connections to wider Swiss society it is hard for unions to build connections to these workers and to fight for better working conditions. Therefore neither the working conditions nor the lack of information on the subject can be expected to change in the forseeable future.



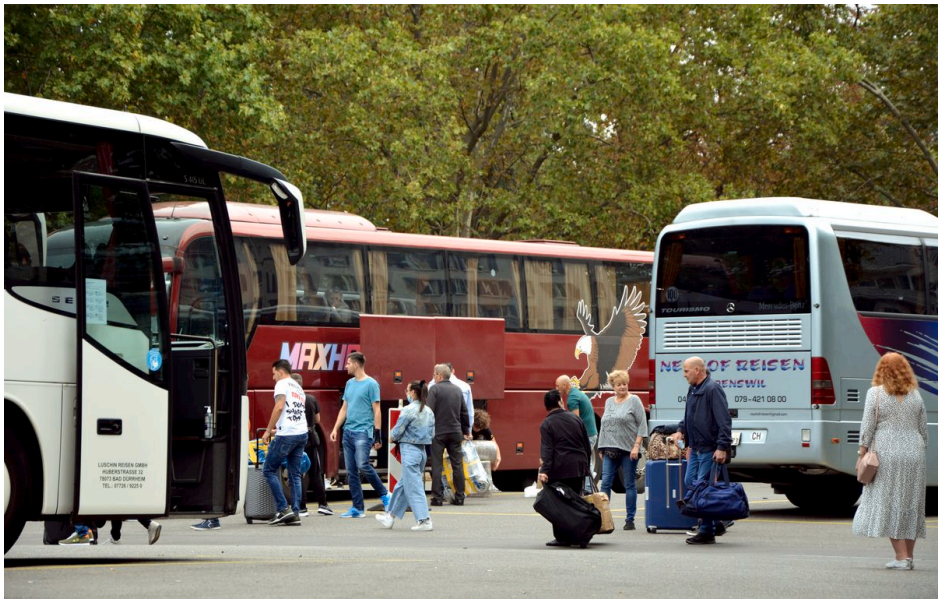
Metabolism of seasonal labour in Switzerland. According to official statistics, foreign non-family labour makes up 15.5% of the agricultural labour force in Switzerland. But these numbers are skewed and probably underestimate the actual amount of people.

In the vast majority of cases job application goes through unofficial channels. Family or friends from the same village who have already worked in Switzerland act as informants and intermediaries for new applicants.

Requirements to Work Seasonally in Switzerland

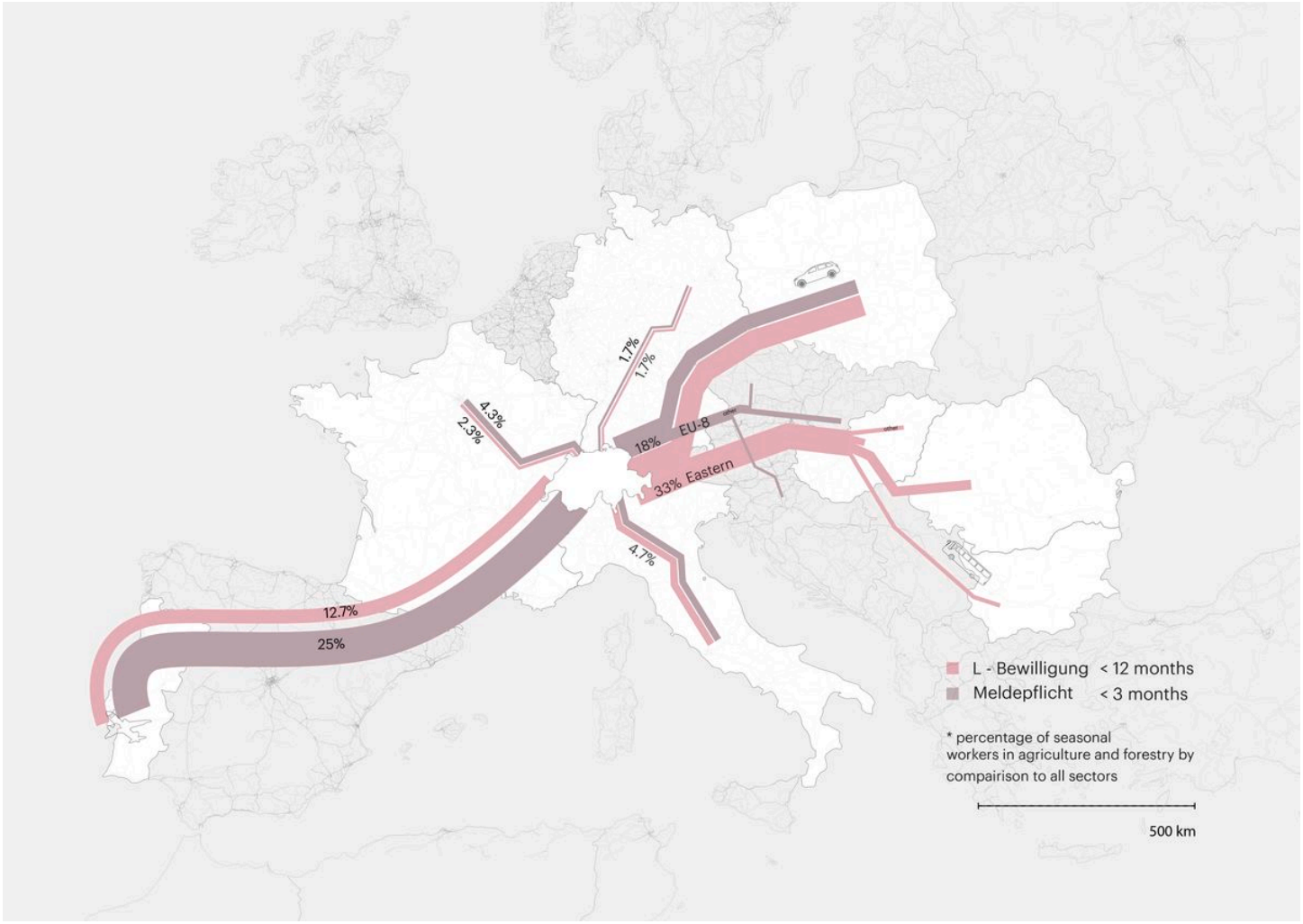
The vast majority of seasonal workers are from the European Union. An employment in another European country is legal because the bilateral accords allow free movement of persons. In general the seasonal workers arrive from the poorer regions of the EU where living standards are lower. Typical countries of origin include Portugal, Romania, Poland, Italy and Hungary.

Transport is usually arranged by the seasonal workers themselves. Depending on where they come from, they travel individually or in groups by car, by bus or by plane.



Departure at Carparkplatz Sihlquai, Zurich

Seasonal workers who come from outside the European Union without a permit are called Sans-Papiers. It is not uncommon that asylum seekers are employed as agricultural workers.



Seasonal labour in Switzerland is mostly from the poorer regions of the European Union. The majority arrive by bus or by car. The type of accommodation and work varies depending on the farm they are employed.

Living Conditions on the Farm

The type and quality of housing for seasonal workers depends on the employer. In the worst cases employers use modified containers as housing units. Some smaller farms dedicate a room or two in the farmhouse for seasonal workers and interns. Larger farms that require seasonal labour for extended periods of time usually build a worker house next to the farm or retrofit existing buildings.

A newly built worker house at Gerber Gemüsebau.

It is uncertain how often poor housing conditions occur in Switzerland, because it is difficult to obtain data on seasonal workers, as the farmers themselves are not always willing to provide information on seasonal workers. Getting in contact with the workers is even more difficult because of language differences and the temporary duration of the stay.

Johann Schär, Girl with cow, not dated

Johann Schär, farming family making hay, around 1915

Changes in Agricultural Labour

The image of Swiss family farms in people's heads is still characterized by traditional family farms. Specifically, that are farms where all labour is done by the family. Here, the parents and their children (or even grandchildren) live on the farm and as they age, the farm is given to the next generation. This model is independent of outside labour and therefore of wages and more generally the employer-employee relationship. Even today, especially in a political context, this is how Swiss agriculture is described.
This image is not completely wrong either; as most agricultural labour is still family labour. It just doesn't recognize non-family labour.

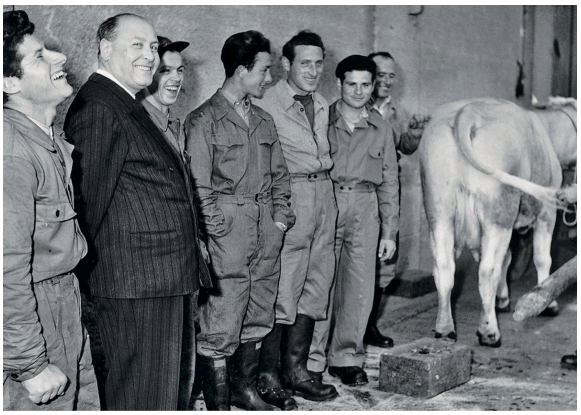
Two farmers mowing hay by hand in the Zürcher Unterland. (Photograph: Agricultural School Schwand-Münsingen)

The entire farming family contributed to securing the food of the Swiss people with their harvest work. (Photograph: H. Stettler)

Two women using hoes to work the ground around the turn of the century. (Photograph: Research and Consulting Center for Agricultural Engineering, Brugg)

Farmworker, early 20th century

Italian saisonniers taking a break, 1960s



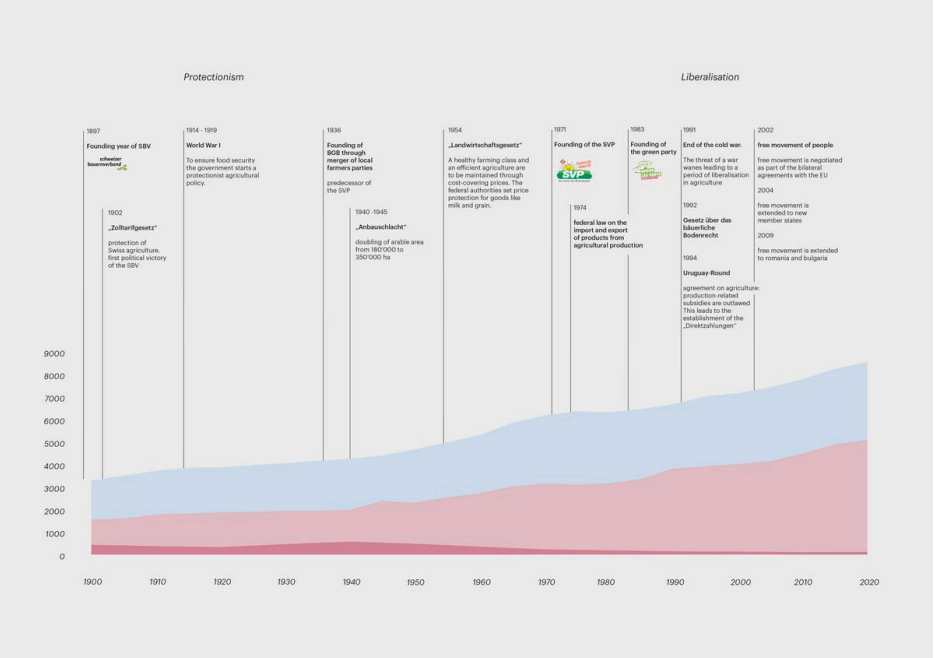
Italian saisonniers at a dairy farm, 1950s

Contemporary seasonal
labour in the Canton of Zürich.

In Search of Employment

Over the centuries, non-family labour has taken different forms in Switzerland. While family farms and agricultural cooperatives were predominant in the mountainous regions of the country, there were larger Landowners, the so called gentry, in the lowlands. Their farms needed farmworkers, who often times came from nearby valleys. These were men and women who were usually not able to afford to buy their own land. With the replacment of feudal relations and rising efficiency in agriculture this form of non-family labour declined and became uncommon by the early 20th century.
The first major group of foreign non-family labour in Swiss agriculture were Italian saisonniers. Large scale Italian immigration to Switzerland began in the late 19th century. But for agricultural production the second wave after 1945 was more important. At that time the Swiss government began encouraging the arrival of guest workers. While these were employed in all economic sectors, it was the first time, acricultural labour was done by foreigners on a large scale. As productivity increased, the number of farms fell, but seasonal workers were still needed since the size of farms was increasing. Therefore the decrease was mostly in family labour, while seasonal labour remained a small but ever more important part of the agricultural labour force.

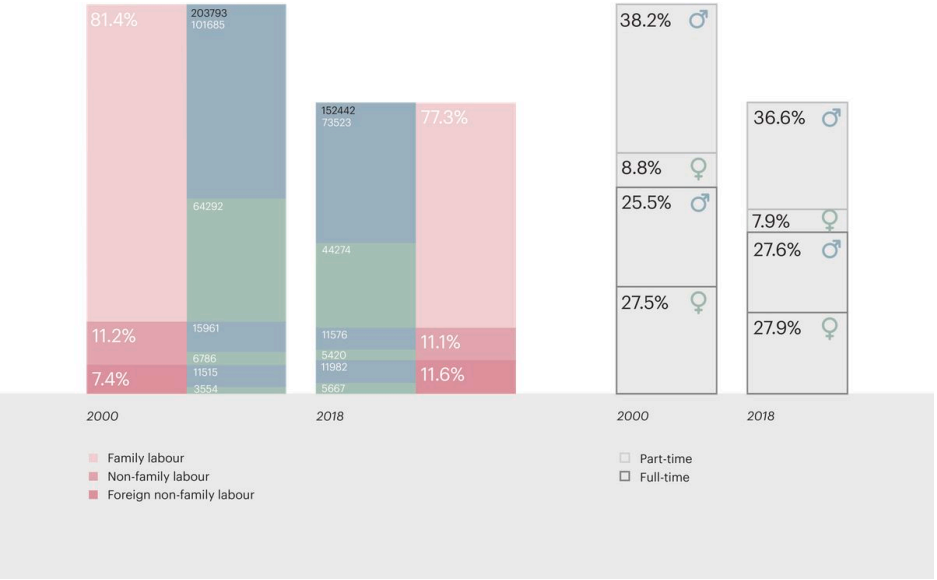
Gradually, during the post war period, employment in agriculture declined both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total labour force. This happened despite protectionist measures and subsidies. While at the beginning of the 20th century close to 30 percent of all Swiss workers were employed there, at the start of the new millenium the number had fallen to around 5 percent. This had huge cultural consequences. Most Swiss people in the 19th century had a strong connection to agriculture, because either they or someone in their family worked on a farm. Nowadays this connection to the reality of how food is produced is severed, but a romantic image of family farms remains.



Due to increased protectionism, the number people working in agriculture rises between the world wars. After that, the importance of the agricultural sector declines. By the 1990 new trade agreements are signed, which removes many protectionist measures. Today, agriculture makes up only around 3% of Swiss employment.

In the 70s and 80s seasonal labour in Switzerland shifted from Italy to other parts of Europe, especially Yugoslavia. Since agriculture was an unique economic sector that mostly relied on family labour and had little union involvement, illicit work became more common. Some farmers took advantage of Sans-Papiers (Migrants without regular residence status) who were desperate for employment and put them to work for illegally low wages. When Swiss Sans-Papiers began fighting for their rights, especially since the 2000s, these conditions became public and illicit work declined.

In 1999 the European Union and Switzerland signed the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons. This came into effect in June 2002 and allowed citizens of all EU countries to seek employment in Switzerland without restrictions and vice versa. As a result the supply of seasonal workers for Swiss agriculture increased. In 2004 and 2009 free movement of persons was expanded to include the new member states of the EU.



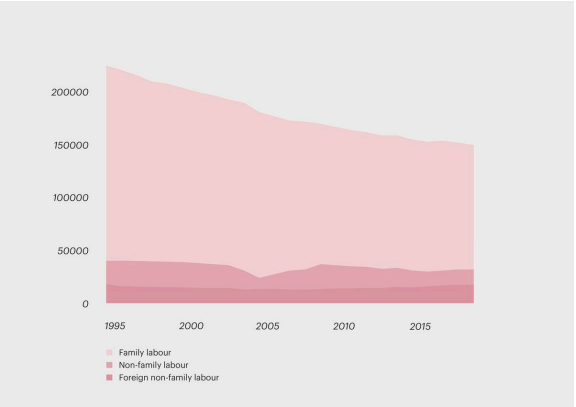
Demographics of agricultural labour in Switzerland 2000 and 2018. The overall number of employees has declined while the gender ratio and the ratio of part-time to full time work have remained similar. Only foreign non-family labour has increased.

Upheavals in Swiss Agriculture

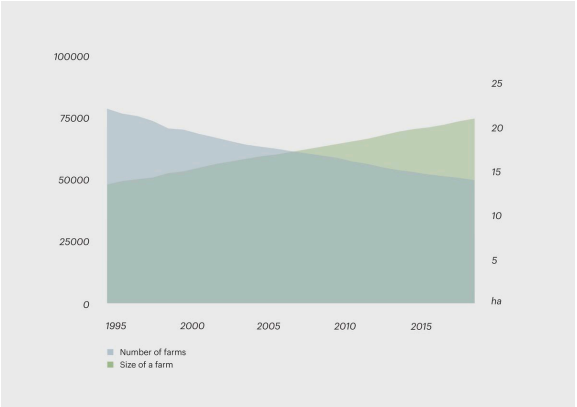
During World War I it became clear how dependent Switzerland was on agricultural imports. To ensure food security, the government began introducing protectionist policies. This sheltered farmers from international competition. The Swiss farmers union, created in 1897, favoured this direction. After the war, the policies were left in place. While Switzerland remained neutral in World War II, the government increased arable land to reach self-sufficiency. At this time agriculture became an important part of national self-preservation and had a high ranking within Swiss society.

Gradually this image faded in the post-war years. But protectionist policies were kept in place. This was lobbied for by the Swiss farmers union and justified with the looming threat of the Soviet Union. In 1991, when the cold war ended, began a period of liberalisation. Import restrictions were lifted, as were many prohibitions on crop cultivation. In 1994, after the conclusion of the Uruguay-Round, a series of trade negotiations between 123 countries including Switzerland, new rules for agricultral policy came into effect. Most importantly, production related subsidies were outlawed. Instead governments could subsidize agriculture indirectly, eg. by paying farmers for ecological performance contributions. In Switzerland this led to the establishment of direct payments (Direktzahlungen).

This liberalisation of agriculture has brought many of business opportunities for farmers, they now have more freedom to experiment with crops and intensify production, but this opportunity exists only for those who can afford it. While larger, more profitable farms tend to benefit from liberalisation, those who are barely keeping afloat are often dependent on government support through direct payments. While the economic interests of farmers seem to be drifting apart, they are all still represented politically by the Swiss farmers' union, who, for historical reasons, have kept the trust of farmers.I the past 25 years the number of family farms has fallen significantly, while the remaining farms have, on average, increased in size. At the same time family labour is decreasing while the number of non-family workers has remained almost constant. This shows an increasing dependence on non-family labour as farms grow in size and family labour becomes less significant. While still alive in people's imaginations, the traditional family model farming, is slowly dying out.



Types of agricultural labour in Switzerland from 1995 to 2020



Number of farms in Switzerland and average farm size from 1995 to 2019

Eichenberger Obst in Laufen-Uhwiesen in early december

Disappearance of the Traditional Family Farm, Eichenberger Obst - A Farm Adapts

Laufen-Uhwiesen is a small, mostly agrarian commune in the Zürcher Weinland. Situated between soft forested hills and the Rhine, it is home to over a dozen farms. The vine knife on its coat of arms reminds us that vinyards have had a long history here. On its sunny south slopes viniculture can be found to this day. But not just grapes benefit from this geographic location.

One of the larger farms in the commune is Eichenberger Obst, who as the name suggests focus the production on fruit cultivation. The farm is run by Peter Eichenberger and his family. Eichenberger Obst grows mostly apples and pears, but they also produce other fruit in smaller quantities. This was not always the case. When Peter Eichenbergers grandmother married into the farm, the production was completely different. The 6ha of farmland were mostly used by cattle and pigs. The farm made dairy products and sold them locally. Additionally they had a kitchen garden for self supply as well as a few apple trees. Given the modest size of infrastructure and production, the family could manage the work without outside labour. In short, it was a typical Swiss farm of its time. This mixed production provided security by ensuring that at least some crops would yield good harvests every season.

In the 1960s Peter Eichenbergers parents started transforming the production by cultivating fruit on a larger scale. Their choice to turn away from a mixed production and to specialize was mirrored in many farms of the time. They also began selling their products directly on the farmers market in Schaffhausen. In 1993, Peter Eichenberger took over the farm. A few years later he chose to open a farm store to be able to sell more products directly on site to customers. He also expanded the size of the farm by leasing and buying up more farmland. Storage and production facilities were also expanded. Today a significant part of the apple and pear production is sold to Migros, while most other products are sold on the farm store and the farmers market.

Peter Eichenberger and his Son Erik in front of their farmhouse.

The farmhouse today. In the background production and storage facilites can be seen. The former barn now houses a farm shop.

The farmhouse and barn in 1962. The first fruit crops are being planted in the form of low trunk trees.

The farm and its surroundings, 1970. Ongoing expansions of the fruit and berry plants and buildings are becoming visible.

Today Eichenberger Obst ist still run by the family, but they rely almost entirely on non-family labour.
The farm is just one of many examples of farms that had to specialize their production to survive financially. And as with many others this specialization and the increase in size and production brought with it a need for more labour. The family alone was not sufficient to cover the workload. Therefore Eichenberger had to employ non-family labour. As with most Swiss fruit and vegetable farms the majority are seasonal workers from abroad. The number fluctuates over the year, but in total the Eichenberger farm employs 15 people, with 12 of them being seasonal workers from abroad. The seasonal workers are mostly from Lithuania and Poland. Their wages start from the standard 3'300 CHF and rise with work experience. Peter Eichenberger tries to keep a good relationship with his workers and most of them live in a repurposed barnhouse on the farm.

"In order to remain competitive with domestic and foreign farms, production must be increased, optimized and specialized. If the farm is able to produce more quantity, the production and thus the final product becomes cheaper and the overall demand increases." – Peter Eichenberger

Peter Eichenberger is proud of the fact that he has secured the farms existence for the next generation. But he also knows that his business is dependent on being able to expand in the future, which means that he needs cheap and compentent labour force. And as things stand that labour can realistically only come from abroad, since Swiss agricultural workers demand higher wages.

Rows of low-trunk apple trees.

Fruit production with nets for protection from hail.

Newly built storage and production hall.

Apple cultivation with storage and production halls in the background.

Storage boxes in front of a production facilty.

Emergence of New Ways to Farm

While the number of farms in the past 25 years has declined, this decline was not uniform among different types of farms. Looking at the decline more closely reveals a differentiated picture. The number of farms in Switzerland fell from just under 80’000 in 1995 to around 50’000 today. At the same time the number of organic farms more than doubled. Notably the number of farms with an area of over 30ha also increased. If these two categories of farms are subtracted it becomes evident that there has been a drastic decline in non-organic modestly sized farms. Usually these are farms that, for various reasons, cannot afford to grow or specialize their production enough to become profitable. They tend to follow a more traditional approach to agricultural production where most of the labour is done by the family. This limits their ability to cultivate labour-intensive crops that yield more value per ha. Usually, this is not a deliberate choice either. Despite their low wages, hiring employees is a financial risk for small farmers, because their value can only be assessed at the end of a season when the finished product is finally sold. Additionally there can be bureaucratic hurdles to growth that require expensive lawsuits to solve. Take for example the Spargelholf Spaltenstein, a vegetable farm in Flaach, another commune in the Zürcher Weinland. The farm has become specialized in asparagus production. They chose to hire seasonal workers and needed to build accomodation for them. But the canton allowed only farms of a certain size, that the Spalteinsteins didn’t have at the time, to construct additional buildings. Only after ten years and a lengthy legal process were they able to secure building rights.

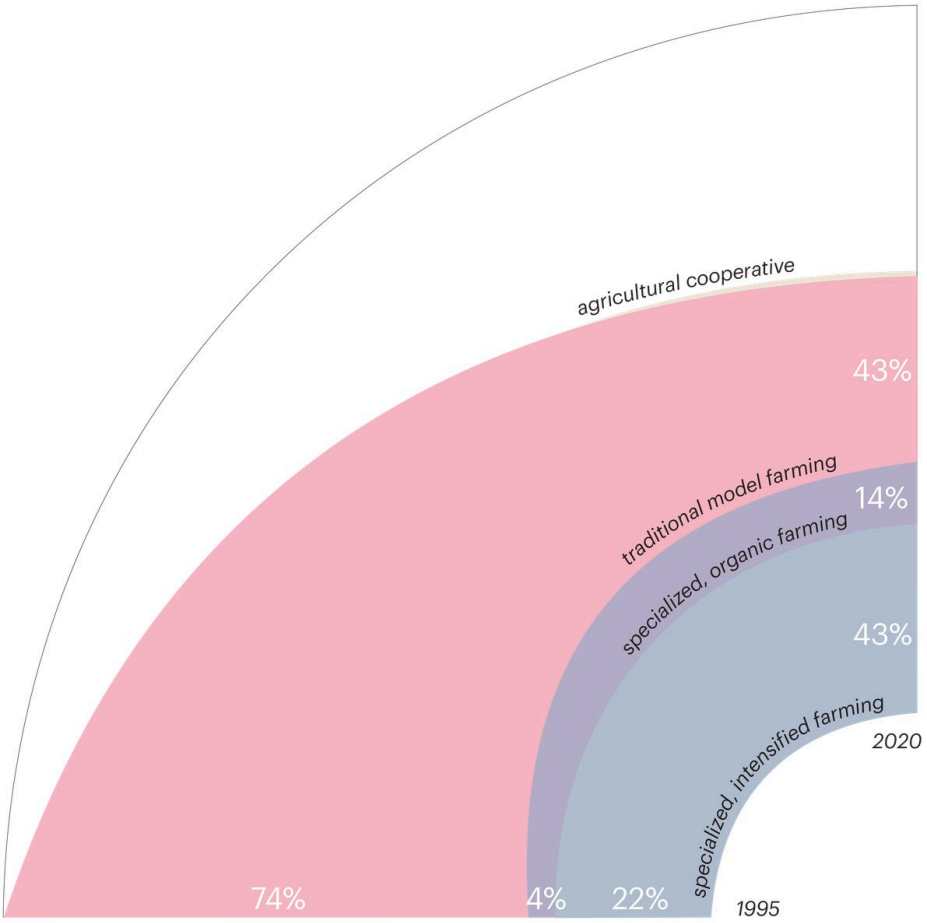
Susanne and Rolf Spaltenstein in front of their farmhouse.

“We wanted to build. Unfortunately our intention was slowed down by the canonal authorities for about 10 years. Only farms that have a certain size already – and thus are expected to have a future – are getting permission to build.” - Rolf Spaltenstein

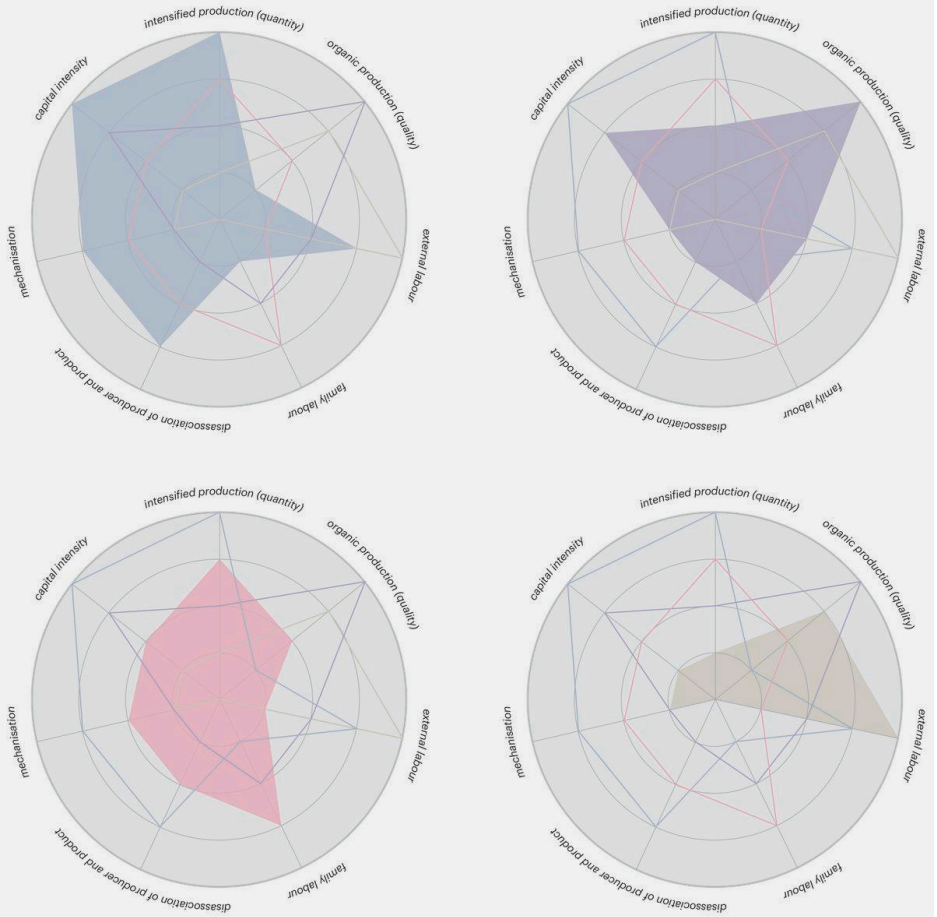
One alternative to specializing in production is organic farming. While organic production can lower efficiency and production volume, it can also allow farmers to sell their products for higher prices. Organic farmers trade stricter regulations for access to a more profitable market niche. Rising awareness of ecological issues has allowed this form of production to flourish. But for many farmers making the switch is a risk and some do not want to risk being dependent on ecological subsidies.

The only way to maintain a profitable farm while relying on conventional production has been to increase the productivity and size of the farm. This is done by rationalizing, specializing in only a few crops and hiring employees. In short these family farms gradually become large businesses. This more capital intensive business model stands in contrast with the idea of Swiss agriculture being comprised of small family farms, but it is increasingly becoming the standard. While many remaining family farms in the sense that the farm is still run by the family, most labour is non-family labour, of which most are seasonal workers from abroad. Agricultural subsidies are central to political discussions on agriculture, but tend to play a minor role in the income of this production model.

Recent years have also seen alternative forms of agricultural production emerge, such as agricultural cooperatives like Ortoloco or Meh als Gmües. There, cooperative members pay a yearly subscribtion to recieve fresh products. They also commit to working on the field a few days each year. This type of agriculture is not dependent on the market but it is still a niche phenomenon, that has had little impact on the agricultural system as a whole.



Different production models from 1995 to 2020. While there has been a general decrease in the number of farms, those who were able to specialize either by switching to organic farming or by intensifying production and increasing farm size survived.



Different production models in present day Swiss agriculture compared.

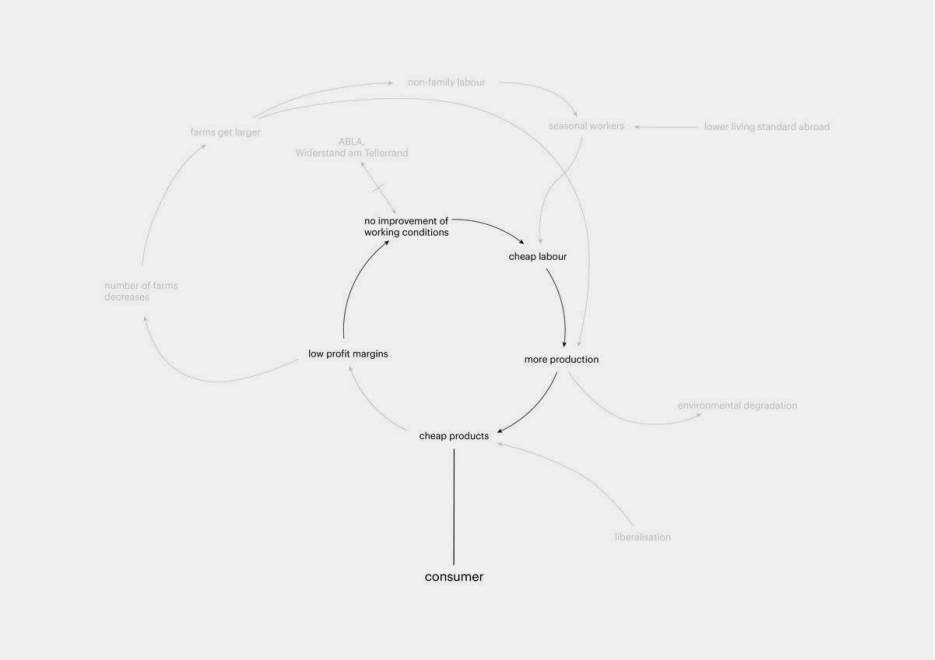
Agricultural Production Leads to an Endless Cycle of Conflicts

To summarize, farmers find themselves in a difficult situation. Due to the liberalisation of food markets and increased international trade the price of food is steadily falling. Whereas over 40 percent of an average swiss household budget in 1945 went to food, today it is less than 10 percent. This is unlikely to change, since consumers demand ever cheaper prices. But a competitive market and its effects mean that profit margins for farmers tend to be low. The agricultural supply chain, in which most of the income from a purchased good goes to retailers, only intensifies this issue. Only a small fraction of the price paid at a supermarket by a consumer goes to the farmer.

This in turn means that since farmers work on a tight budget, they cannot afford high labour expenses. This is how the low wages and high working hours of agricultural workers are justified. If this supply of cheap labour can be secured, the farmer can keep production high and survive in the market. It should be noted that those who cannot afford to increase food production or lower costs tend not to sell their farm immediately. Most sustain themselves by other means. Either by working other jobs or by generating some other income, not dependent on food production, on the farm.

Successful farms that are able to grow, contribute to lowering prices, therefore contributing to a vicious cycle. Not only wages are affected by this. The need to increase production comes not only at the expense of wages, but also the environment. Environmental concerns are usually present in the minds of farmers, but they are of secondary importance if a farm can barely sustain itself financially.

If a farm is not successful, the next generation usually gives up on the profession and sells the land. Over time this leads to the aforementioned decrease in the number of farms. Other, more profitable farms buy up or, if they are not able to, lease the land. So the average size of the farm grows, again leading to a need for non-family labour. And since this labour has to come from people who are both willing to work under harsh conditions for little money and have to be knowledgeable in their field, most of it has to come from abroad. As long as wages in some regions of Europe are low enough and the economic situation is bad enough, the supply of agricultural workers is guaranteed. But living standards in countries such as Poland and Hungary are growing. For now the difference in wages is still enough to cover the demand of labour, but an increasing number is choosing to seek employment in their home countries. If the economies of poorer european regions catch up to Western European standards, farmers will have to increase wages or face a labour shortage. In Germany, where agriculture is similarly dependent on seasonal labour from abroad, but wages are even lower, this issue is already present.



A vicious cycle. Low profits due to a competitive market mean that labour needs to be cheap, for farms to survive. As farms grow in size and family labour cannot cover the workload anymore, farms rely on on seasonal workers, who are willing to work for low wage.

In the Swiss public there is little awareness for either the bad working condition of agricultural workers or the problems of Swiss farmers. In fact, the most salient issue concerning Swiss agriculture is currently the amount and distribution of direct payments (Direktzahlungen). These are paid for through taxes and thus closer to the minds of citizens. Therefore there is little pressure from the outside to solve the underlying issues of the agricultural system. Swiss unions are not strongly involved in agricultural labour, partly due to this work historically being family labour, partly due to the fact that organising seasonal workers is difficult and not financially worthwhile. There are only a few groups trying to improve working conditions in agriculture, such as ABLA (working group of professional associations of agricultural employees). In February 2020 activists organised a meeting in Bern, called “Widerstand am Tellerrand” towards advancing the interests of agricultural workers. While the work of these groups is admirable, without support from unions or the public, they do not have much power to change agricultural working conditions.

Alternative Production Models For Fair Working Conditions -The Seasonal Labour and the Swiss Farm

Working conditions in agriculture must be improved. Seasonal workers experience financial discrimination in addition to social discrimination. It shoud not be the case that farms put money into investments while putting off the payment of fair wages. Workers and employers should be on an equal footing. We want fair agricultural production, where seasonal labour is valued. After all, agricultural production cannot grow without seasonal labour.

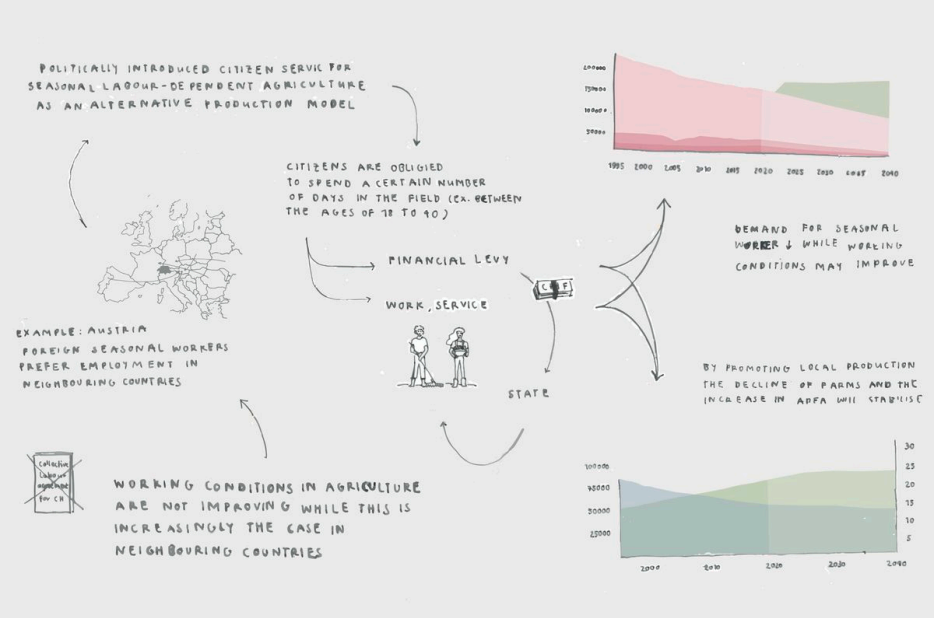
Sezonieri Model

Austria can be seen as a role model when it comes to improving agricultural working conditions. There, a change was triggered by an uprising led by activists and foreign labour itself. Based on this, the trade union PRO-GE has increasingly addressed the issue of agricultural labour and supported the establishment of a workers' representation called Sezonieri [https://www.sezonieri.at/], which informs seasonal workers in Austria about their rights and demands nationwide improvements. Sezonieri has already achieved improved working conditions and has led to a better public understanding of agricultural labour.

The example of Austria shows that it is possible to improve agricultural working conditions in Western European countries where agricultural and economic conditions are similar to Switzerland. Seasonal workers in Austria now receive a minimum net wage of 1000-1200 euros depending on the state they work in. This wage must be considered in relation to the median income, which in Austria is 2850 euros. In Switzerland, a seasonal worker receives between 1500 and 2000 CHF net with a national median income of 6538 CHF.

Because of the Sezonieri Movement agricultural employees in Austria have a right to a 13th and even a 14th salary, dependent on how many months they work on a farm. In Switzerland the concept of a bonus salary is an exception. Furthermore, while in Switzerland 55 working hours per week are the standard, the weekly working hours in Austria are limited to 40 hours with a maximum of 20 hours of overtime. For these additional hours, Austrian workers get a bonus of 50 % to their wage.

Given that Swiss agricultural production is becoming more and more dependent on seasonal labour from abroad, similar changes are possible and desirable in our country as well. There are already labour activists engaged in improving agricultural working conditions in Switzerland. We start with the assumption that these activists can help organise enough workers or that they can gain support from unions or a political party.

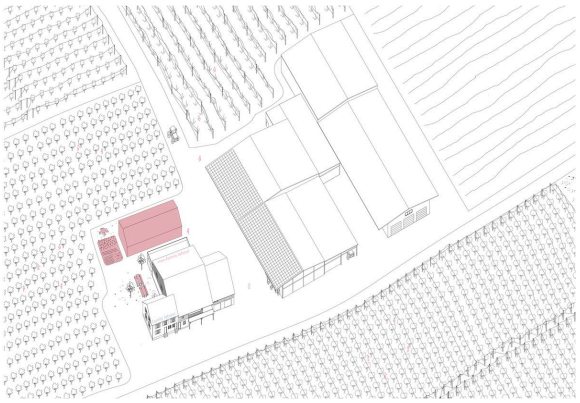


Starting point, consequences and results of the Sezonieri production model.

Public pressure, union involvement and better informed seasonal workers could leverage enough political pressure to negotiate for shorter hours, better wages, stronger protections and so on.
A stronger negotiating position might even lead to the establishment of a collective labour agreement for all of Switzerland.

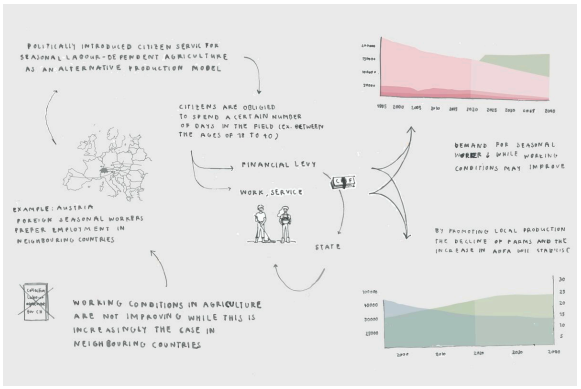
The resulting stronger labour laws would make Swiss farms a more attractive place to work both for domestic and foreign employees. Union protection as well as a stronger comradeship between agricultural employees might lead them to a stronger connection to Switzerland, meaning that some might chose to work here for a longer period of time. Simultaneouslyany smaller, less profitable farms will not be able to afford to employ seasonal labour anymore, resulting in an intensified disappearance of small family model farms. On the other hand successful, profitable farms like Eichberger Obst who are able to manage to pay higher wages for their employees without going under financially, might benefit from a growing supply of competent non-family labour.

The growing number of employees with stronger and fairer labour rights would demand more and better accomodation spaces. If, because of more favourable pay and life in Switzerland, seasonal workers choose to work on the farm for multiple years in a row, they might be able to create more personalized spaces for themselves, such as gardens and resting spots. With more free time, seasonal workers would also gain the abilty to shape their lives outside of work, learn the German language and connect to wider Swiss society.



Shorter weekly work hours lead to more free time. Agricultural workers enjoying an apero after a day's work.

A growing farm needs more space to accomodate seasonal labour.



Starting point, consequences and results of the Service Citoyen production model.

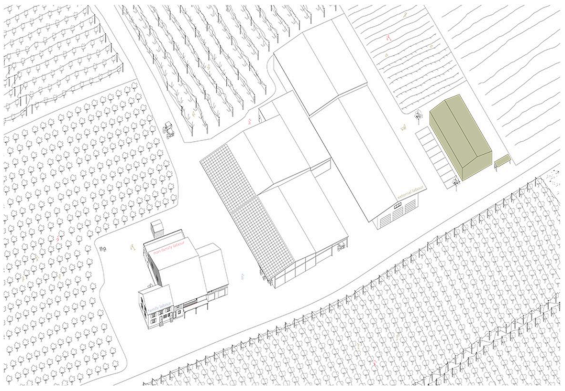
A possible solution to this problem, without needing to resort to illicit work, might be found in the idea of Switzerlands militia system. The association ServiceCitoyen.ch, started in 2013, is planning to launch a political initiative in 2020 to extend the Swiss militia system outside of the military. The idea is to commit all Swiss citizens to a set time of civil service of their choice (if possible) equvalent to military service.

If successful, such a citizen service could solve many labour shortages in the Swiss economy, including agriculture. For farmers this would provide an affordable alternative to seasonal workers as a large part of the employees wages would be payed by the state.

Demand for non-family labour in agriculture would sink, alleviating the need for precarious working conditions. For Swiss citizens, a stronger connection to food production, agricultural labour and ecological issues would be established. This, as well as reduced labour costs could slow the decline of family farms, and the industrialisation of farming.

For an individual farmer like Eichenberger this would mean a conversion from foreign seasonal labour to seasonally arriving service members which would travel to the farm by bus or private car.

Many of these service members would not be trained in agricultural work, meaning that the famer would need to teach them at first. The growing volume of people working and passing through the farm would require additional infrastructure. This could be intended for rest, social events, eating and storage of the personal belongings of service members.



Service members being introduced to agricultural work by the farmer.

Building intended for rest, storage and social events for service members as well as bus station for new arrivals.

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Architecture of Territory
Professor Milica Topalović

TEACHING TEAM
Muriz Djurdjevic
Dorothee Hahn
Michael Stünzi
Milica Topalović
Jan Westerheide

Prof. Milica Topalović
ETH Zurich
ONA G41
Neunbrunnenstrasse 50
8093 Zurich
Switzerland
+41 (0)44 633 86 88
www.topalovic.arch.ethz.ch