

Article

Policy Instruments to Improve Foreign Workforce's Position and Social Sustainability of the Agriculture in Italy

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Abstract: Agricultural employment in advanced economies has been suggestively described as a “short and steep” pyramid with only limited opportunities for workers to climb to higher positions, especially when they belong to the most vulnerable categories, such as migrants. The presence of poor jobs and living conditions for temporary agricultural workers reported by mass media, trade unions, NGOs, and international observers contrasts dramatically with the idea of a modern and thriving sector, as the Italian agricultural sector should be, and it represents a challenge for the social concerns that have been alongside environmental ones in the definition of sustainability since the Brundtland Report released in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Even mechanisation does not necessarily facilitate better working conditions. In fact, where the workforce is largely replaced by machineries, the remaining opportunities for paid workers are mainly for unskilled, physically demanding, and seasonal jobs. This has brought about the so-called “paradox of prosperity”, where the gap between farm and nonfarm workers in economically advanced countries has widened in terms of wages, benefits, and prospects for upward mobility. This in turn triggers a vicious circle with a structural lack of available workforce for the sector, which has been increasingly provided by migrants with very little bargaining power. On the other hand, the adoption of new technologies and digitalisation in agriculture is leading to an increasing demand for skilled workers, which often remains uncovered because of the low conditions offered. Against this background, the aim of our work is twofold. First, we characterise the role of the foreign workforce in relation to the structural changes in Italian agriculture and considering territorial differences. Second, we examine the main policy instruments to facilitate recruitment and tackle undeclared work and more specifically the Quality Agricultural Work Network (Rete del lavoro agricolo di qualità) launched in Italy in 2016 to tackle undeclared work and exploitative labour. We do so by conducting a literature review and semi-structured qualitative interviews with 16 farmers in Italy carried out in 2022 within the project Rural Social ACT funded by the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (2021–2027). The results show that even though foreign workers are a key resource for agriculture in Italy, there remain severe recruitment issues and segregation in low-skilled and precarious jobs. Overall, it is necessary to improve the awareness of the key role of work in agriculture and to strengthen the effectiveness of tools to enhance the visibility of compliant farms. So far (January 2024), only 6600 farms have joined the Quality Agricultural Work Network, with an overall modest enthusiasm from the farmers interviewed about its current effectiveness. Other instruments are explored such as employee sharing contracts, and there clearly emerges a need for public support of professional training through the Common Agricultural Policy to improve both the bargaining power of foreign workers and the productivity of the sector.



Citation: Macri, M.C.; Orsini, S. Policy Instruments to Improve Foreign Workforce's Position and Social Sustainability of the Agriculture in Italy. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 4998. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16124998>

Academic Editors: Jacopo Bacenetti and Antonio Boggia

Received: 25 March 2024

Revised: 5 May 2024

Accepted: 29 May 2024

Published: 12 June 2024



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Keywords: fair food system; agricultural employment; seasonal workers; undeclared work; foreign workers; social sustainability; decent work

1. Introduction

Migrant labour has become increasingly relevant in Italian agriculture, whilst the share of Italian workers engaged in farming has been decreasing steadily since the 1980s [1]. Notwithstanding their significant role, migrant workers in agriculture often operate in poor working conditions, sometimes even as undeclared workers ([2–6] Martin 2016). In this context, it is relevant to understand the role of migrants in Italian agriculture, also in relation to its structural changes, and the opportunities they are given to contribute to the sector while operating in acceptable working conditions. Good working conditions and decent wages are among the concerns at the core of the European social model [7] as well as literature that includes “fair working conditions” among the social sustainability indicators in agri-food systems [8]. Consistently with this approach, the last reform of Common Agricultural Policy introduced “social conditionality”, which obliges farmers to comply with the minimum labour standards to receive subsidies. Despite there being no universal definition of social sustainability, the role of the quality of labour conditions is growing in both the theoretical analysis and the actual policies for the development of agriculture.

The aim of the work presented in this paper is twofold. Firstly, we identify the main characteristics of migrants’ work in the Italian agricultural sector, with a focus on its role and some paradoxes. Secondly, we review and explore Italian farmers’ points of view on the main policy instruments to manage migrant labour and tackle undeclared work.

2. Structural Changes and Employment in Italian Agriculture

The inverse correlation between the economic relevance of agriculture and per capita income is broadly accepted and described by the literature, even though there are different theoretical interpretations of the role of agriculture in this development pattern [9].

Even in Italy, after a long transformation process, people currently involved in agriculture represent a very low percentage of total employment. Since 2013, the decreasing trend has stopped, stabilising itself at around 900 thousand people and at a share of 4% of total employment (Figure 1).

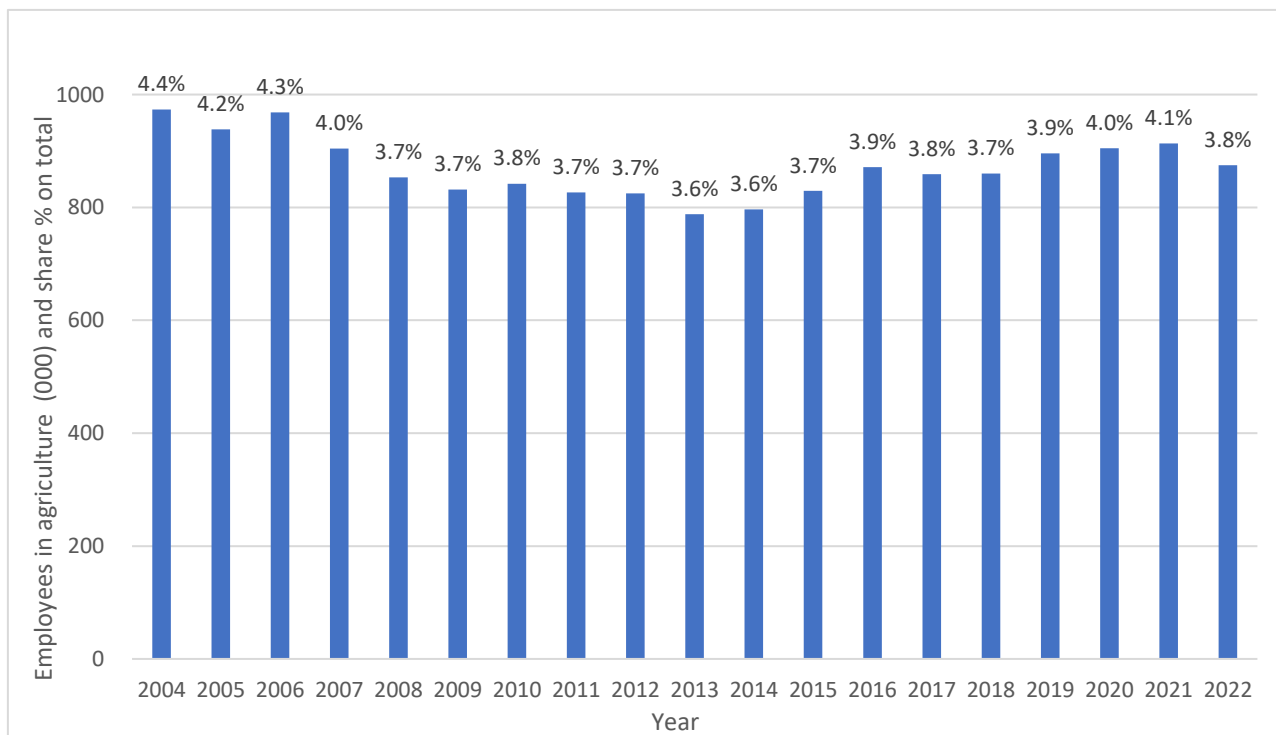


Figure 1. Employment in agriculture, absolute (000), and share on total. Source: ISTAT; Labour Force survey.

The employment stabilisation occurred even though the sector is still experiencing a restructuring process characterised by a long-term reduction in the number of farms and an increase in farm size [10] (Table 1). Structural changes happened side by side with social ones, namely the disappearance of large patriarchal families [11] and the substantial convergence of lifestyles in urban and rural contexts [12].

Table 1. Farms, utilised agricultural area (UAA), and total agricultural area (AA) in the last 5 census years.

Year	Absolute Values (in Thousands)			Index 1982 = 100			UAA per Holding (Hectares)	AA per Holding (Hectares)
	Farms	UAA	AA	Farms	UAA	AA		
2020	1,133,023	12,535	16,474	36.2	79.2	73.6	11.1	14.5
2010	1,615,590	12,856	17,081	51.6	81.2	76.3	8.0	10.6
2000	2,393,161	13,182	18,767	76.4	83.3	83.8	5.5	7.8
1990	2,848,136	15,026	21,628	90.9	94.9	96.6	5.3	7.6
1982	3,133,118	15,833	22,398	100.0	100.0	100.0	5.1	7.1

Source: ISTAT, Census of Agriculture.

Therefore, even though Italian agriculture may still be strongly considered a “family-run” sector, the composition of the workforce has significantly changed with a steady decline in family labour and an increasing demand for hired workers. The share of family workforces decreased from 75% in 2010 to 53% in 2020 (Table 2).

Table 2. Agricultural workforce: people and working days (SWDs).

	People		Percentage %		Variation % 2020/2010
	2020	2010	2020	2010	
Family workforce	1,459,588	2,932,651	53.0	75.8	−50.2
Salaried workforce	1,295,753	938,103	47.0	24.2	38.1
Total	2,755,341	3,870,754	100.0	100.0	−28.8
	Standard working days		Percentage %		Variation % 2020/2010
	2020	2010	2020	2010	
Family workforce	145,506,354	200,904,955	68.0	80.1	−27.6
Salaried workforce	68,621,448	49,901,085	32.0	19.9	37.5

Source: ISTAT, 7th Census of Agriculture.

Due to the increasing relevance of hired workers, one would expect their involvement in terms of working time to also have grown. Surprisingly, compared to the previous census, the number of standard working days for salaried workers (53 SWDs) is exactly the same as it was in 2010. On the contrary, the time spent on average by family members on farms is now (100 SWDs) 44% longer than in 2010 (69 SWDs). Therefore, whilst the roles for family members working on farms have improved, salaried workers seem to remain relegated to a marginal position despite their growth in number. This means that, for the most part, hired workers are employed discontinuously, as shown by the share of temporary and seasonal workers in the labour force survey, which is much higher than average in the total Italian economy (Figure 2).

Moreover, the issue is not only precarity but its magnitude. According to data from the National Institute of Social Security’s database (INPS—Istituto Nazionale Previdenza Sociale), almost a third of temporary employees are in the class of less than 51 working days per year or more precisely 18 days on average per year (Figure 3).

Italy is not an exception, since in most OECD countries, compared to other sectors, agriculture relies heavily on temporary work and, in many countries, as in Italy, this is also linked to the quick growth in migrant labour [13].

The progressive defection of domestic workers can be explained by the precarity as well as the low remuneration in agriculture (Figure 4). In fact, employment in farming has become less attractive with the increase in overall educational level [14].

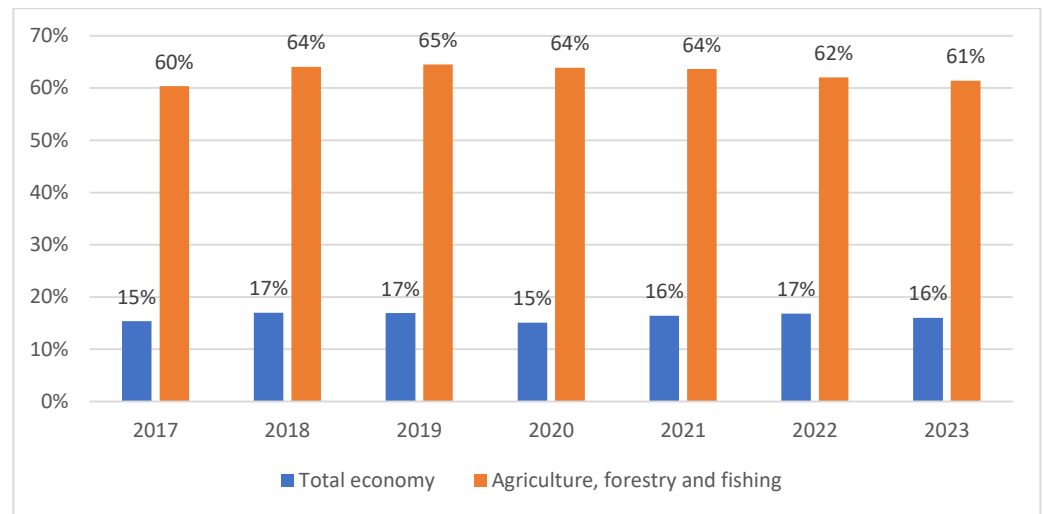


Figure 2. Incidence of temporary workers compared to total employees. Source: ISTAT, Labour Force Survey.

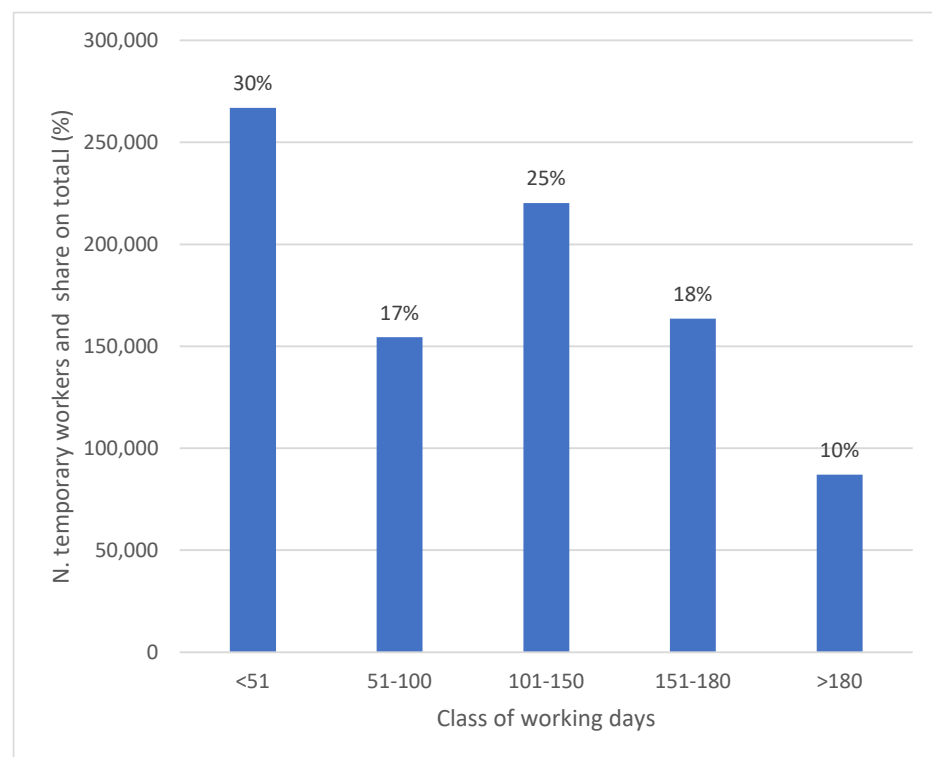


Figure 3. Number and incidence of temporary workers by class of working days (WDs). Year 2022. Source: INPS, Observatory on farms and agricultural workers.

Furthermore, in agriculture there seems to be a widespread attitude to pass on to the workers the pressure exerted by retailers and food processors on producers to keep the primary products' costs low, adopting a low level of labour protection [15]. In fact, the level of informal work (because of completely or partially not declared work) in agriculture is higher than in the rest of the economy (in 2021, 23.2% of workers in agriculture were irregular, more than double that in the total economy (11.3%) (ISTAT)). Undeclared work

exposes people to risks because of a lack of or insufficient social security coverage, such as unemployment benefits, maternity allowance, and retirement wages.

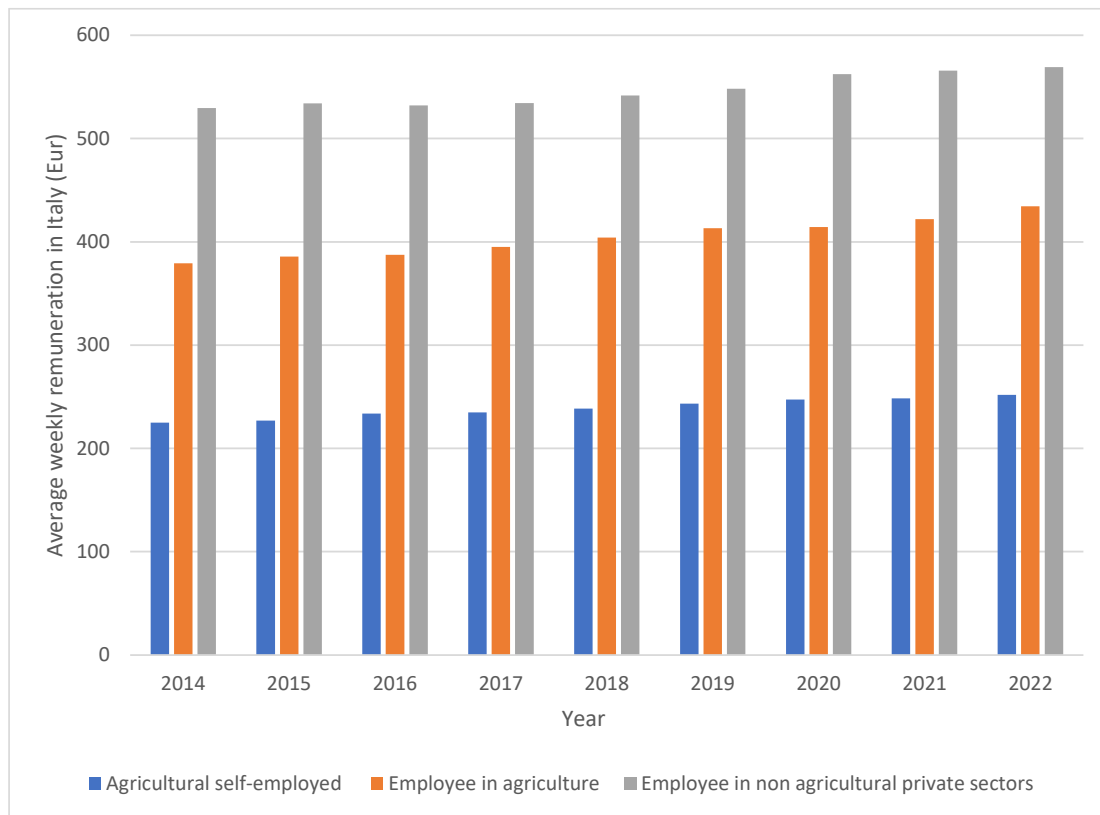


Figure 4. Average weekly remuneration in Italy. Source: INPS, Observatory on self-employed workers and employees.

The low attractiveness of agriculture is one of the main explanations for the increasing relevance of migrant workers—18% of workers hired in 2023 (ISTAT, Labour force Survey)—that is, it seems to be the result of workers with low bargaining power being segregated into unattractive labour market segments. Looking at the dependent component, the share of foreign workers amongst total employees is even higher than that of total employment. Based on the National Institute for Social Security (INPS), the share of foreign workers amongst temporary and permanent employees altogether is 36%, as declared by farmers (Figure 5).

On the whole, Italian agriculture seems to be experiencing the same paradoxical relationship between the GDP per capita gap in terms of wage and benefits between workers in agriculture and other sectors observed in other countries [16]. On the other hand, looking within the country, the worst working conditions—in terms of weekly wage on average and rate of non-regular workers—are observed mainly in the regions (the upper left quadrant in Figure 6) where the GDP per capita is lower, and the incidence of agricultural workers is higher than the country's average (the lower right quadrant in Figure 7).

In the case of Italian regions, the high incidence of agricultural employment in total is not always associated with bad working conditions, namely non-regular workers and low wages. For instance, agriculture in the province of Bolzano guarantees a weekly wage (EUR 486) greater than the country's average (EUR 422), while the rate for non-regular workers (8%) is far under the national level (23%), even if the proportion of sectoral employment is double (6%) that of the national one (3%). The high percentage of agricultural employment in Bolzano is presumably a consequence of it being territorial vocation; elsewhere, it could derive from a lack of other opportunities.

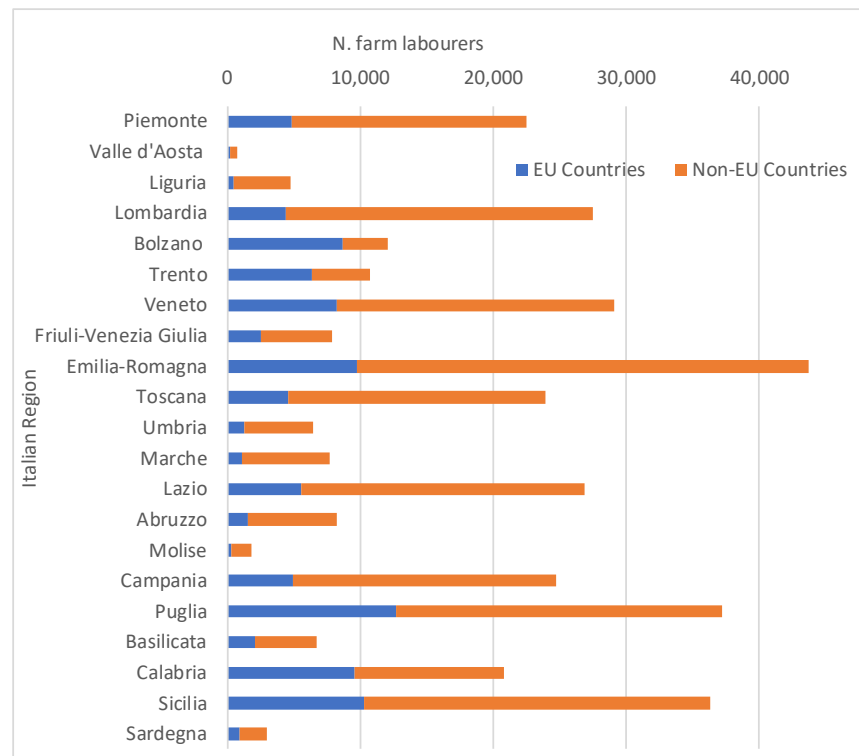


Figure 5. Number of farm labourers by Italian Region. Year 2022. Source: INPS, Observatory on farms and agricultural workers.

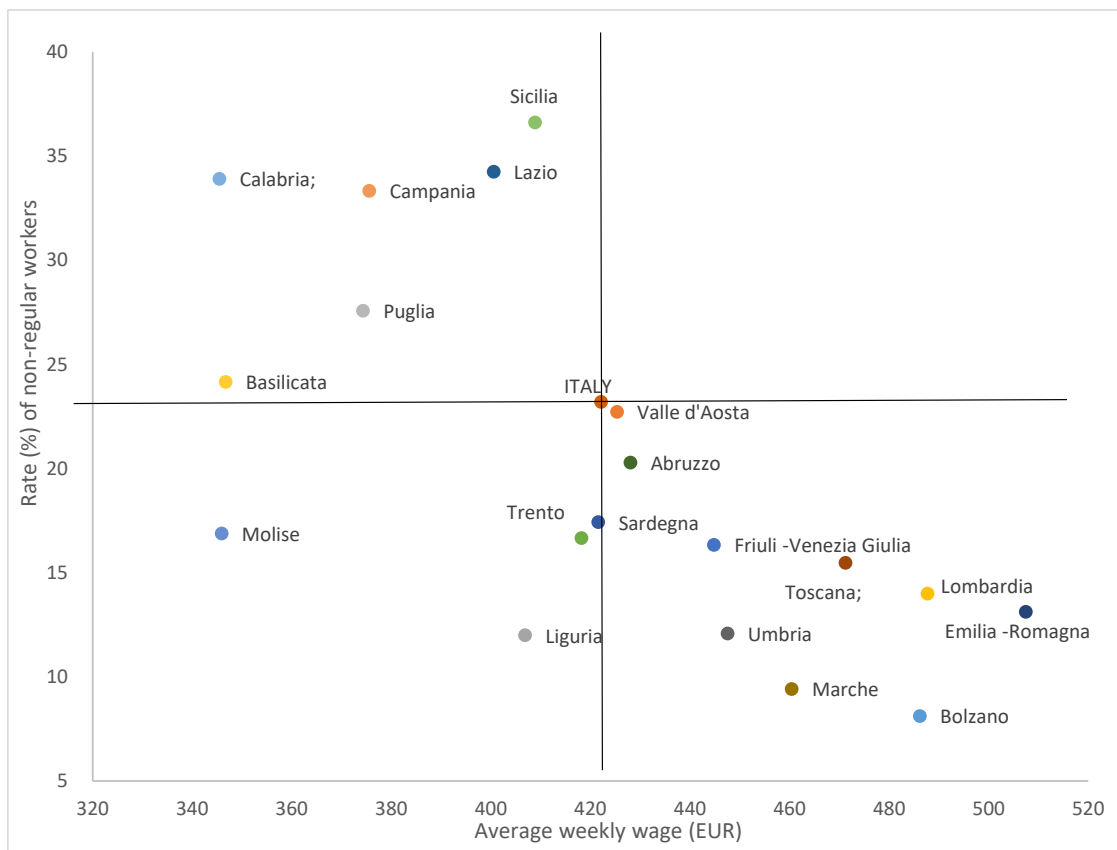


Figure 6. Average weekly wage (EUR) (X) and rate of non-regular workers in agriculture (Y). Year 2021. Source: INPS: Observatory of self-employed workers and employees; ISTAT: National Account.

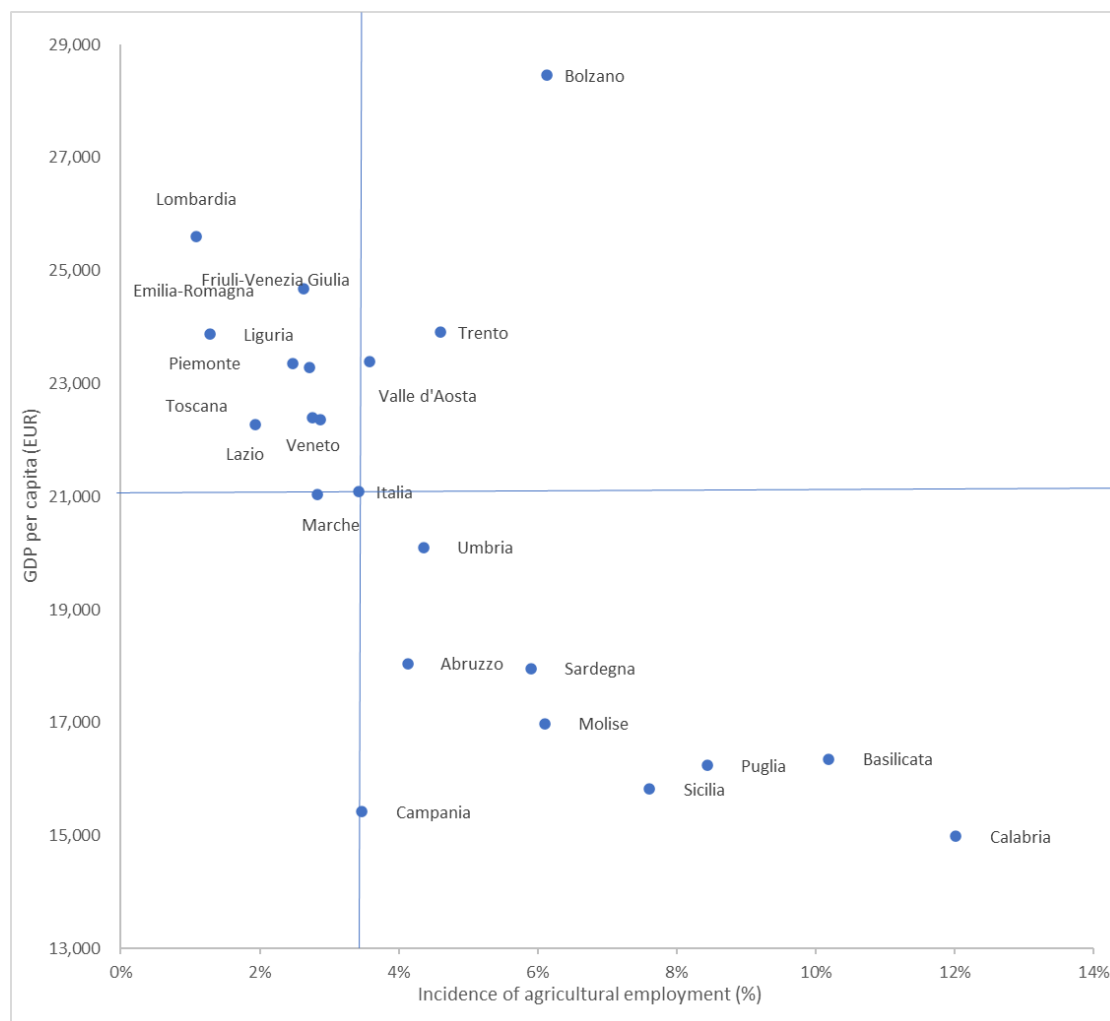


Figure 7. GDP per capita and incidence of agricultural employment in total. Year 2022. Source: ISTAT, National Account.

In less dynamic economic contexts where employment in agriculture represents one of only a few opportunities, employers can offer worse working conditions, but this can produce an adverse selection of low-skilled workers as well as less productive farms. In the long run, this situation could widen the gap among regions in relation to sectoral productivity and result in a vicious circle.

Foreign workers are more vulnerable to exploitation than national workers for various reasons, which even leads to workers belonging to different nationalities negatively competing with each other [3]. Furthermore, especially in the most fragile contexts, a lack of effective management of migration could result in undeclared work in agriculture being a “pull factor” for irregular migration [17]. Therefore, in shaping interventions to face undeclared work, it is relevant to take into account the specific situations of foreign workforce members.

3. Policy Instruments to Tackle Undeclared Work in Agriculture: A Literature Review

There are some policy instruments for tackling undeclared work in agriculture in the EU, including Italy. Unfortunately, a publicly available impact analysis of their effectiveness is lacking. Based on a literature review and the work carried out on behalf of the European Commission by Williams and Horodnic [2], these instruments can be grouped as follows:

- **Deterring instruments.** These are usually based on a strict inspection and sanction system. The premise to make this effective is to make irregular work easily detectable,

for example, by imposing that a job contract be written before the start of the job, as it happens in many countries including Italy. Another approach that may act as a deterrent is the “naming and shaming” used in the UK and Ireland, where businesses who do not comply with the laws regarding working conditions are named and become known in the community.

- Compliance-facilitating instruments. The typical example of this is probably represented by the “Gangmaster licensing Act 2004” in the UK. According to the act, gangmasters are given a licence to supply a seasonal workforce to businesses, provided that certain rules and working conditions are met. According to Findlay and McCollum [18], many migrant workers, who are supplied to farms by gangmasters in the first instance, receive employment contracts on the same farms for the following seasons.
- Other facilitating instruments are vouchers and joint employment. The latter allows different farms to employ workers jointly under one single contract, thus reducing costs and administrative burden [2]. The former is used for occasional work and in Italy is currently only targeted to specific categories of workers, i.e., students and retired people.
- Compliance incentives. The Quality Agricultural Work Network in Italy is supposed to incentivise compliance to the law. In other countries, like Belgium and the Netherlands, work quality certification schemes have been implemented for specific sectors, i.e., the mushroom sector, which have been experiencing difficulties due to low prices [2].

An approach which can be considered somewhat hybrid between deterring and incentivising is one that had been implemented in Puglia (Italy) consisting of a booking list and quota system. Any workers hired by farms in the region would register on the list; a quota system was supposed to be used to establish the number of labourers needed for a job, according to the crop and hectares. By comparing the number of workers anticipated by the list and the number declared by the company for social security purposes, officials could identify possible cases of irregular work. The region was also going to introduce incentives for companies taking on registered workers. Unfortunately, this regional initiative eventually failed because employers’ associations boycotted it at a local level.

4. The Quality Agricultural Work Network

The Quality Agricultural Work Network (QAWN) was established by law 116/2014 in the context of some measures aiming to boost Italian agriculture, employment, and generational turnover. At first, the QAWN aimed to simplify inspections by creating a list of compliant farms, which become less likely to be inspected since they are expected to comply with labour laws.

Later, with the introduction of the law 199/2016, the QAWN became an instrument to contrast undeclared work and gangmasters (caporalato) in agriculture. Law 199/2016 intended to overcome the simple repressive approach by trying to remove the conditions that facilitate the power of “caporali”, namely the lack of effective and transparent intermediation between farms and workers, and insufficient territorial services, especially mobility towards working places and residences. In that context, the QAWN offers an instrument to qualify farms for a type of certification.

After the introduction of QAWN in 2014, amendments followed that extended the types of operators that can join the QAWN to local institutes, employment centres, and bilateral entities representing employers and workers. At the same time, the objects of the requirements were extended to other matters beyond social security legislation (Box 1).

After eight years, the number of farms registered in the QAWN is low (6608 registered at the end of January 2024, Figure 8) compared to the number of farms with employees (174,636 in 2022).

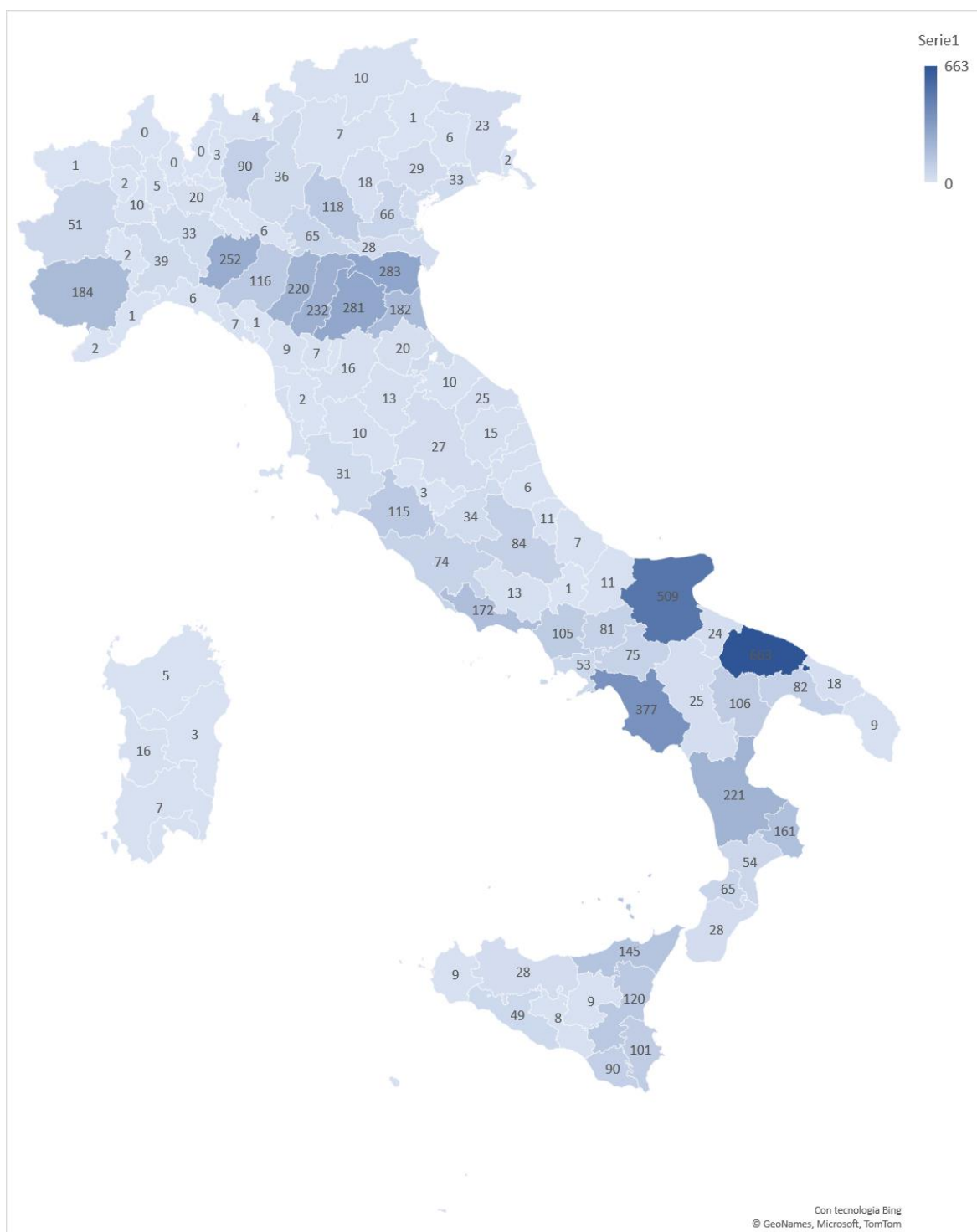


Figure 8. Number of farms registered in the Quality Agricultural Work Network on 31 January 2024. Source: INPS, www.inps.it.

The percentage is higher in some regions, such as in Emilia Romagna, where joining QAWN gives some advantages for receiving higher scores when participating in Rural Development Programme tenders (Figure 5).

Box 1. Current requirements to be eligible to join the QAWN.

After some amendments, farms and other entities which ask to be admitted must:

- have no criminal convictions for infringements of Labour and social legislation, crimes against the public administration, crimes against public safety, crimes against the public economy, industry and commerce, animal-related crimes and crimes in matters of income and value added taxes, crimes referred to in Articles 600, 601, 602 and 603-bis of the Italian Criminal code;
- have not been recipients, in the last three years, of administrative penalties, even if not definitive, for breaches regarding work, social legislation and compliance with obligations relating to the payment of taxes and fees. This provision does not apply where the offender or the party who is jointly liable has resolved, prior to the issuing of the definitive provision, the non-compliance and settled the payment of the penalties on a subsidised basis within the terms provided by applicable legislation;
- Is up to date with the payment of social security contributions and insurance premiums;
- applies the collective bargaining agreements referred to in Article 51 of Italian legislative decree No. 81 of 15 June 2015;
- are not controlled or connected, pursuant to Article 2359 of the Italian Civil Code, to persons who do not meet the legal requirements stated above.

Source: INPS website.

5. Interviews with Farmers

5.1. Methodology

A case study [19] consisting of qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews of 16 farmers was conducted in summer 2022 in Italy within the project Rural Social ACT funded by the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (2014–2020) [20] (The objectives of the interviews were to understand the farmers' points of view on the role of migrant labour on their farms and to learn their approach to human resources from recruitment to professional development, as well as the policy instruments they value the most to facilitate recruitment within a transparency framework. The number of interviews carried out was deemed sufficient based on Yin [19], and the point of saturation was achieved [21]. The farms involved in this qualitative research differ in terms of geographical region, farm size, main production activities, and whether or not they are registered in the Quality Agricultural Work Network (Rete del lavoro agricolo di qualità), as shown in Table 3 below. The interviews lasted 40–60 min and were tape recorded upon farmers' consent. Farms were purposefully sampled using the researchers' contacts. Content analysis [22,23] was used to analyse the interviews.

Table 3. Characteristics of the farms interviewed.

Farm	Farm Size	Production	Registration Quality Agricultural Work Network	Farm Workers (Employees)
#1	10 ha	Arable, livestock (dairy)	NO	Italians, EU, and non-EU
#2	20 ha	Livestock (dairy)	YES	Italians, EU
#3	not available	Horticulture	YES	Italians, EU, and non-EU
#4	20 ha	Vineyards	YES	Italians and EU
#5	40 ha	Vineyards	NO	EU and non-EU
#6	20 ha	Permanent crops	NO	EU and non-EU
#7	75 ha	Livestock (dairy, poultry)	YES	Italians and EU
#8	100 ha	Livestock (dairy)	YES	EU
#9	15 ha	Permanent crops	NO	EU
#10	20 ha	Permanent crops	YES	EU and non-EU
#11	210 ha	Vineyards	YES	Italians, EU, and non-EU

Table 3. Cont.

Farm	Farm Size	Production	Registration Quality Agricultural Work Network	Farm Workers (Employees)
#12	55 ha	Arable, livestock (dairy)	YES	Italians, EU, and non-EU
#13	110 ha	Arable	NO	EU and non-EU
#14	30 ha	Vineyards	NO	Mainly Italians
#15	60 ha	Arable, horticulture	YES	Italians, EU, and non-EU
#16	30 ha	Horticulture	NO	EU

5.2. Main Interview Results

Overall, the interviewed farmers acknowledged the importance of migrants' work on their farms. This is because it has become increasingly difficult to recruit a domestic workforce in agriculture, which relates to the seasonality and the physically demanding nature of farming. Also, because of the seasonality, contracts are normally temporary and/or part-time, which makes the job opportunity less appealing than others.

Nevertheless, the farmers we interviewed seemed reluctant to invest in professional training for migrant workers. One of the main reasons for this is that farmers fear that sooner or later they will go back to their own countries. Also, one barrier to successfully undertaking training is reported to be a lack of proficiency in the Italian language. Therefore, foreign labourers mainly execute basic manual work, whereas the most delicate tasks, such as dealing with and spraying chemicals, are undertaken by the farm owner or specialised (Italian) operators.

As for recruitment channels, in most cases informal networks are used, including "word of mouth" and previous working experience on the farm. This means that it is not easy to obtain a job in agriculture for those who come to Italy for the first time and do not already have contacts such as friends or other family members living there.

Overall, the farmers we interviewed considered the current recruitment routes provided by Italian law as inadequate. This is especially true when it comes to farming tasks, which are difficult to plan and foresee. The decree on migration flow D. lgs. 286 of 1998 used to employ non-EU workers requires an administrative burden that is considered not compatible with "just in time" farm needs. In these cases, farmers often make use of cooperatives acting as intermediaries between workers and farms, which are able to provide labourers to farms quickly upon their request. On the one hand, the interviewed farmers recognised the efficiency and the reduction in administrative burden they receive when drawing on cooperatives; on the other hand, they seemed aware of the potential risks of exploitation.

During the interviews, other contractual forms were explored and talked about, such as so-called "vouchers" and joint employment. The former was introduced in 2008 as a very flexible instrument to remunerate subsidiary, discontinuous, and occasional jobs in agriculture. Besides a net wage of EUR 7.5, each voucher provided a quota to cover the national system of insurance against accidents at work, but neither sickness nor motherhood nor even unemployment benefit was provided. Before they were eliminated in 2016—because of the severe opposition by the trade unions and negative public opinion—they were used by the farmers that we interviewed, who considered them especially handy to allow the execution of short-term tasks while avoiding the costs associated with fixed-term contracts. Finally, the farmers strongly advocated for the simplification of the recruitment procedure, at least for seasonal workers.

Joint employment, on the other hand, seems to be far less popular amongst the farmers involved in our study, with some farmers just ignoring it, and others considering it problematic. Even though they acknowledge the reduction in administrative burden that it would bring, farm operation needs are usually simultaneous on different farms (because of regional production specialisation), which would make it difficult to plan and share the

labour force. Also, trust between farmers would be a prerequisite for the success of joint employment. In addition, a greater desire to cooperate among Italian farmers could benefit working conditions, increasing the competitiveness of the sector [24].

The farmers interviewed declared an unwillingness to supply training, especially to foreign workers, because of the additional cost due to language barriers and the high risk of the investment since foreign workers try to move to other activities as soon as possible. An effective active labour policy in agriculture should improve both productivity of the sector and individual professional development.

Finally, the interviews included some questions on the Quality Agricultural Work Network. Farmers whose farms were not registered in the network had never heard of the initiative and simply did not know anything about it. The other farms decided to register mainly for two reasons. Firstly, some of them were demanded to do so by their buyers (multiple retailers). Secondly, they decided to join the network to be less prone to inspections. Overall, it seems that the farmers that we interviewed perceived it as a top-down initiative. They did not appear to have strong ideas about the network's efficacy, nor were they convinced that the initiative has actually had an impact on encouraging changes in employers' behaviour. However, some farmers see the network as an opportunity to receive access to some niche northern European markets that seek or prefer providers that can guarantee transparency and fair working conditions.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this study, we characterised the role of the foreign workforce in relation to the structural changes in Italian agriculture, and we examined the main instruments to facilitate recruitment and tackle undeclared work. Generalisation of the results cannot be claimed, as this research was based on a case study approach and a limited number of interviews, yet some conclusions can be drawn. Also, this study focuses on Italy only, and a comparative analysis with other countries goes beyond the scope of our research. However, a broader analysis including migrant labour in the agricultural sector of other countries is foreseen in the future and recommended.

Despite the high technological level and the international recognition of the Italian agri-food sector, and the appeal associated with "made in Italy", Italian agriculture often seems to only be able to offer poor working conditions to hired workers, especially in the south of the country where job opportunities are scarce.

This has led to a risk of employment segregation for the most vulnerable population, namely foreign workers. The foreign workforce has become more and more important for the sector, and their role was well acknowledged by the farm owners interviewed in this study. However, at the same time, there seems to be a reluctance and lack of resources to invest in migrants' professional training.

This regrettable situation is socially unsustainable [25] and, in the long run, may affect the viability of the sector. In fact, the depletion of market conditions may damage the sector, alienating more qualified human capital and encouraging unfair competition among farms, especially in the context of agricultural commodities. Besides the ethical reasons, measures need to be taken to prevent the risk of farms that intend to comply with all the rules being pushed out of market.

In this context, the social sustainability and competitiveness of agriculture appear to be undermined, as qualified human capital has become increasingly lacking within the sector.

At the same time, and somewhat related to the issues described above, there is a need to make recruitment procedures more efficient to prevent undeclared work, which exacerbates workers' vulnerability further.

Action to improve cooperation among farmers and aggregation processes amongst employers, through tax and social security benefits, could improve the use of joint hiring, giving more employment stability as well as reducing and making training costs more efficient.

Professional training—facilitating the participation of non-native Italian workers in courses through the involvement of interpreters and cultural mediators—should be organised by public authorities by promoting the connection between institutional agencies (schools, universities, vocational training centres) and farms capable of integrating formal training with practical activities and internships.

Instruments like the Quality Agricultural Work Network remain little known, and their effectiveness is limited if they are not clearly tied to benefits for farmers and workers.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.C.M. and S.O.; Methodology, M.C.M. and S.O.; Formal analysis, S.O.; Investigation, M.C.M. and S.O.; Writing—review & editing, M.C.M. and S.O.; Project administration, M.C.M.; Funding acquisition, M.C.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received funding from the Italian National Rural Program 2014–2020, funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD, decision n C(2021)6630).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study prior to participation in the survey.

Data Availability Statement: The statistics presented in this study are available on public websites of Italian National institute of Statistics (www.istat.it) and Italian Institute for Social Security (www.inps.it), results from survey are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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