Exceptional policies for exceptional situations? How COVID-19 revealed persisting precarity for seasonal migrant workers

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Abstract

When COVID-19 hit Norway and national borders were closed on 12 March 2020, farmers were ready to start preparations for a new growing season. Within a few weeks of the lockdown, the government implemented innovative economic measures to persuade unemployed Norwegians to work in agriculture, but this failed to produce the expected results. At the same time, it also created a narrative in which labour shortages were understood as a question of Norwegian food security and self-sufficiency. Migrant labour in agriculture was defined as 'crucial', and borders closed because of COVID-19 were opened for seasonal workers. In this article, we use the COVID-19 pandemic as a case for a critical discussion of the social position of migrant labour in agriculture and the use of exceptional measures in the agrifood sector. We consider how migrant workers came to be depicted by the government as necessary to Norwegian food security, to justify their exclusion from basic protection during the pandemic, thus contributing to their precarity as workers. Based on an analysis of media outputs, political decisions, and policies, as well as statements and publications from stakeholder groups, we show how the Norwegian government mirrored the sector's economic and production interests and used the prospect of food insecurity as an argument for allowing exemptions from the seasonal immigration ban for workers in the 2020-2022 period. The discussion is based on conceptualisations from the literature on agricultural exceptionalism, food security, and self-sufficiency, as well as precarity among migrant labourers.

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INTRODUCTION

When COVID-19 hit Norway and national borders were closed on 12 March 2020, farmers were ready to start preparations for a new growing season. It quickly became clear that farmers in Norwegian fruit and vegetable production worried about access to migrant seasonal workers to get the plants in the soil and harvest the crop after the growing season. Within a few weeks of the lockdown, the government implemented innovative economic measures to persuade unemployed Norwegians to work in agriculture, but this failed to produce the expected results. At the same time, it created a narrative in which labour shortages were understood as a question of Norwegian food security and self-sufficiency. Migrant labour in agriculture was defined as 'crucial', and borders closed because of COVID-19 were opened for seasonal workers.

In this article, we use the COVID-19 pandemic as a case for a critical discussion of the social position of migrant labour in agriculture, and the use of exceptional measures in the agrifood sector. We consider how migrant workers came to be depicted by the government as necessary to Norwegian food security, to justify their exclusion from basic protections during the pandemic, thus contributing to their precarity as workers. Based on an analysis of media outputs, political decisions, and policies, as well as statements and publications from stakeholder groups, we show how the Norwegian government mirrored the sector's economic and production interests. It used the prospect of food insecurity as an argument for allowing exemptions from the seasonal immigration ban for workers in the 2020-2022 period. We argue that this is an example of an exception to policy.

The use of migrant workers is a relatively marginal phenomenon and affected around 10 % of Norwegian farms at the start of the pandemic, mainly in the fruit and vegetable sector (Zahl-Thanem and Melås, 2022). Despite this, politicians, large agricultural coops, and the Farmers Union argued that, unless the government allowed agricultural labour, Norwegian self-sufficiency would be severely impaired (Farmers Union, 2020a). This article contributes to the literature on migrant labour, precarity in agriculture, and agricultural exceptionalism by showing how the Norwegian government implemented measures favouring a small group of producers and distributors by framing these interests as being of national importance. This was done at the expense of the workers involved and their protection during a global pandemic. The discussion is based on conceptualisations from the literature on agricultural exceptionalism (Skogstad, 1998; Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2009), food security, and self-sufficiency (Clapp et al., 2022), as well as precarity among migrant labourers (Kalleberg, 2018).

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on agriculture-related studies of the COVID-19 pandemic effects, before turning to conceptual work on agricultural exceptionalism, migrant workers and precarity, food security and food self-sufficiency. We then present the methodology, data used, and analysis, before discussing our results and offering some conclusions.

COVID-19 EFFECTS IN THE AGRIFOOD SECTOR

The COVID-19 pandemic had several severe impacts on the global agrifood sector and acted as a catalyst for the reemergence of some old challenges. Food production in general slowed down and logistics came to a halt, as did the distribution and sales of food (Rahimi et al., 2022). In regions heavily dependent on agribusiness imports and exports, for instance in Central America, Mexico (Lopez-Ridaura et al., 2021), and the Caribbean (Blazy et. Al., 2021), concerns over the lack of labour with a negative impact on food security received heightened attention. An Asian study reported a renewed public policy focus on regional production of food staples and welfare, emphasising that small farming systems were found to be more resilient to this kind of shock than large export-oriented systems (Dixon et al., 2021). Darnhofer (2021) reflected on how a crisis can create a window of opportunity for changes in production systems, marketing, and food sales such as shorter food supply chains and direct sales. A common theme in several of the 'COVID-19 publications' is the need for increased diversity in global and regional food systems, to boost resilience and food security. On

the human side, COVID-19 abruptly affected the mobility of farm workers and those employed in the food industry, and increased exposure to risks for those still migrating despite the closure of most borders (Clapp and Moseley, 2020; Constance, et al. 2023).

On the other hand, despite the multiple negative effects of COVID-19, others pointed out the relative stability of food production and the functionality of global and regional food systems. In a European study, Helfenstein et al. (2022) found no real COVID-19 impact on agricultural output. Although specialised, intensive farms faced higher vulnerabilities from the pandemic, whilst small and medium-sized farms and farms with diversified production were less affected. Måren et al. (2022) found that increased diversification of markets and labour acted as adaptive responses across nations as different as Norway, the US, and China. In addition, migrant agricultural workers were exempt from travel restrictions during COVID-19 in several countries including Norway, removing a potential source of reduced food production (Stephens et al., 2020).

The dependency on migrant labour in production and processing became increasingly visible during the pandemic, leading many countries to search for policies to mitigate labour shortages, for instance by labelling migrant workers as 'essential', thereby qualifying them for travel across otherwise closed borders. In a critical comment, Reid et al. (2021) and Allison et al. (2021) warned that labelling migrant workers as essential overshadows the already precarious situation in which these workers find themselves, with the added expectation of being mobile. This also includes factors such as high entry costs, quarantines during the pandemic, often crowded workplaces and housing with contamination risks, and the fact that many migrant workers were not allowed to return to their home countries when borders started to close. In their review of Nordic measures designed to retain the labour of 'essential' migrant workers, Kuns, et al. (2023) underline that the aforementioned challenges were experienced particularly by migrants from outside the Schengen Area, i.e. Asia.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

Exceptionalism and the Norwegian agricultural regime

Policy exceptionalism, and later post-exceptionalism, are broadly discussed in the academic literature on agriculture over the last decades (Skogstad, 1998; Grant, 2012; Rodman et al., 2016; Daugbjerg et al., 2017; Daugbjerg and Feindt 2017; Farsund and Daugbjerg 2017; Greer 2017; Attorp and McAreavey, 2020). Skogstad (1998: 467) describes how agriculture differs from other sectors due to unpredictable production conditions under varying weather conditions, and farmers' relatively low income despite continual efforts to increase efficiency whilst producing goods and services of national interest. Agricultural exceptionalism can also be described as a belief-system assigning regulations, institutions, and policies to an economic sector due to its uniqueness (Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017). This uniqueness is expressed in several ways and has several sources, including special market and production conditions for agricultural products and producers because of their contribution to national goals such as food security and farm incomes (Moyer and Josling, 2002; Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2009). Exceptional arrangements and policies are often expressed in measures such as producer interests being given precedence over consumer interests, the transfer of subsidies from taxpayers to farmers, and protectionist arrangements in international trade (agreements) (Grant, 1995: 156).

Norwegian agriculture is organized around a set of institutions and arrangements aimed at fulfilling national goals across several sectors. Its governance structure is highly corporative, in a system where the Farmers' Union and the Smallholders' Union together with state representatives play a large role in policy development and market regulation. Exceptionalism is rooted in the corporative system and government institutions (Farsund and Daugbjerg, 2017). The main pillars in the model are high tariffs to protect domestic production, market regulation, a quota system for the most important products such as dairy and red meat, and a system of production subsidies to farmers. The subsidy level as well as quotas and target prices are negotiated annually between representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the two farmers' unions

(Farmers' Union and Smallholders' Union) (Almås, 2004; 2016). This corporative arrangement gives the farmers' organizations significant influence over agricultural policy formulation. However, wage levels for hired labour in the sector, and minimum pay for employees in the food industry, are not part of this corporative system.

In the Norwegian context, agriculture produces public goods and services of national value, and the main policy instruments regulating the agricultural sector have broad political and societal support. An established policy goal is 'to ensure Norway's population enough and safe food produced from Norwegian natural resources' (Hurdalsplattformen, 2023). This goal refers to national self-sufficiency in major categories, in particular red meat, dairy, and eggs. Norwegian natural resources refer to non-imported animal feed. In 2022, the official self-sufficiency rate in calories, based on Norwegian resources, was 39% (NAA, 2023). Despite its low self-sufficiency rate, Norway is not considered food insecure by international standards, because of its economic status.

Food security and self-sufficiency

Food security can be understood in several different ways, and the current FAO definition reads:
A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2023).

This definition rests on four pillars or dimensions: food availability, economic and physical access to food, food utilisation, and food stability over time. It has, according to Clapp et al. (2022), become a canon with the UN Committee on World Food Security and the UN FAO. Yet Clapp et al. (2022), as members of the High-Level Panel of Experts of the Committee on World Food Security, have argued that the current UN definition of food security has become too focused on food insufficiency. Clapp suggests adding sustainability, to broaden the scope of food security over time and into the future, as well as individual and collective agency, to allow people the opportunity to have control over their access to food.

In the most recent FAO report 'The state of food security and nutrition in the world' (2023), these concepts have been added to explain the definition of food security but are yet to be formally agreed. The concept of food security has gone from addressing the urgent need to feed the world in the post-World War II era, via a decade of including nutrition in addition to volume in the 1990s, to incorporating sustainability. In 2000, the UN Millennium declared its ambition to reduce poverty and hunger with Goal 1 in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), and its commitment to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by 2015. Acknowledging the contrary, that is, a rise in global hunger since 2015, the current Goal 2 of the UN Sustainability Developments Goals of 2030 reads 'creating a world free of hunger by 2030' (UNSDG, 2023).
The definition of food self-sufficiency overlaps to some extent with that of food security and refers to a country that produces more food or calories than it consumes (Clapp, 2015). By evaluating these two dimensions – food security and food self-sufficiency – separately, as Clapp (2015) does, one can rate countries' performance. For instance, countries that have a low self-sufficiency rate can be food secure due to their high-income levels and purchasing power, and their ability to import the food needed to meet dietary needs. Norway fits this category. Others may have a high self-sufficiency rate but low food security due to low diversity in their productions and/or an inability to distribute what is being produced; and/or they may be exporting too much of their production.

During the 2008 financial crisis, several countries advocated (exercising agency) to increase production volumes and thus self-sufficiency levels to safeguard their populations and to minimise international food trade (Brobakk and Almås, 2011). Norway was one of the countries that took the lead in increasing the focus on food self-sufficiency (Brekk, 2010). One goal was to secure Norwegian agricultural production in competition with cheaper production elsewhere (Bjørkhaug et al., 2012). Whilst food self-sufficiency is a

part of countries' national security policy, some also seek to secure or increase their agricultural production and protect rural areas – a policy that is rooted in the response to the 1972-74 food crisis and explicitly in the 1974 World Food Conference. As we saw above, this blossomed again in the aftermath of the food and financial crisis of 2007-08 (Brobakk and Almås, 2011; Farsund and Daugbjerg, 2017).

The global food security and self-sufficiency debates are thus about both production volumes available to the global population, and fair distribution to ensure everyone's rights, as the FAO sees it. From this perspective, political interventions in global markets on behalf of global food security can be seen as an illustration of the idea that agriculture is exceptional and requires exceptional measures. Former UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, argued that such interventionist measures are necessary since '...food moves where purchasing power is highest, not where needs are most urgent' (De Schutter 2011, as cited in Farsund and Daugbjerg, 2017: 348).

Migrant labour and precarity in agriculture

In many instances and areas, the pandemic made it evident just how dependent modern food production is on access to seasonal workers, and reduced labour mobility during the COVID lockdown became an increasing concern. This dependence with its pervasive effects on job and economic security, family, and the overall well-being of people has become a central feature in most rich western democracies (Kalleberg, 2018), including traditionally family-based agricultural regimes such as the Norwegian one (Bjørkhaug and Blekesaune, 2007; 2008). The transition to a corporate and neoliberal global agrifood regime has intensified the precariousness of the labour serving it – both in practice and in policy (see e.g. McMichael, 2005). Wolf and Bonnano (2016) point to the increased informalisation of labour as a key dimension of modern agriculture. Workers are also often poorly informed about labour rights and often face language barriers. Further, workers might be hired through agencies responding to shifting demands in various labour markets, thus cementing their informality and lack of integration in local communities (Constance et al., 2023; Rye and Scott, 2018). In the US poultry industry, 'white men in unions' are replaced by unorganized women, minorities, and immigrants (Constance et al., 2023), a process that reduces production costs but also removes workers' safety net (Rye and Scott, 2018).

Clapp et al. (2022) are among those who have warned about the extent and precarity of hired migrant labour in the agrifood sector, and the increasing dependence on it. Migrant labour is mainly seasonal and can be brought in 'just in time', which also defines migrant workers as separate from the traditional, non-migrating labour force. Precarious workers are described by some as 'invisible' in the globalised neoliberal economy (Ferragina, et al., 2022; Stachowski and Fialkowska, 2020), or 'doubly absent' due to both lack of interaction with the local community where they work, and lost labour market opportunities in their home country (Sæther and Stachowski, 2023). Rye and Scott (2018) describe how migration in the food sector has changed the rural realm of Europe through a process where domestic labour has gradually become global. This globalisation of the countryside (Woods, 2017) and the emergence of the precarious cosmopolitan (Woods, 2018) has happened simultaneously with manual labour, in general, being phased out of agriculture, and the 'traditional' family-oriented farm based on family labour being replaced by 'modernised' or 'professionalised' farms with the farmer as the main labourer (Bjørkhaug and Blekesaune, 2007; 2008). In Norwegian horticulture, family farm labour has been systematically replaced by wage labour in some instances, and domestic workers replaced by international low-wage migrant workers over the past three decades (Rye et al., 2018). On Norwegian fruit and vegetable farms the migrant workers are seasonal, and in that way temporary, although some do return to the same farm year after year.

A Norwegian study highlights a conflicting perspective that, in spite of working under lower standards than the regular workforce, migrants consider their work conditions 'acceptable' and compare them favourably with conditions in their home country (Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010). The farmers hiring seasonal workers often justify the situation by stating that 'they don't earn much either' (Scott and Rye, 2021). Whilst this can be understood as a legitimation for keeping the cost of labour in the agricultural industry as low as possible, the

ability to send money to family in the home country can also be understood as empowering for the migrants.

The Norwegian labour regime

The governance structure in the Norwegian labour regime has corporatist features, not unlike in the agricultural regime. Both major labour rights and salary levels in the main economic sectors are negotiated annually or bi-annually between representatives for the workers, the employers, and the state. Negotiations are carried out sector by sector, and the workers are represented by national labour union representatives for the sector in question (Nymoen, 2017). Since many sectors decide on minimum wage levels for groups of workers, there is no legislated general minimum wage level in Norway. For instance, in 2023, the minimum wage for unskilled workers with little or no experience in hotels and services, aquaculture and construction was NOK 191, NOK 206, and NOK 215 respectively, as a result of accords between the employer organisations and labour unions in those sectors. For hired labour in agriculture, on the other hand, minimum pay is currently at NOK 145 per hour (Arbeidstilsynet, 2023), substantially lower than for other groups. However, this is more like a recommendation since agriculture has its separate corporatist governance model where workers' rights are decided. Labour rights in agriculture – meaning hired labour and not farmers and farm owners – and wage levels can differ substantially from other economic sectors. One source of these exceptional labour policies in agriculture is the narrative in which access to migrant workers and Norwegian self-sufficiency – a main national political goal – are tightly linked.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Qualitative data constitute the main source for the analysis in this article. We reconstruct a timeline of events from 2020 to 2021 and conduct an analysis of major decisions and statements as described in government archives available online, policy documents (annual budget documents, by-law and regulation changes), news articles, excerpts from TV programs, and agriculture organizations' positions. In addition, we present statistics on the use of seasonal migrant labour in Norwegian agriculture.

We made use of several archives to retrieve data that could inform analyses and discussions of how migrant workers came to be depicted as necessary to Norwegian food security through government discourses justifying their exclusion from basic protection during the pandemic, thus contributing to their precarity as workers. First, a search was conducted in the digital database Retriever for seasonal labour ('sesongarbeidskraft') AND (farming ('jordbruk') OR agriculture ('landbruk') OR fruit ('frukt') OR vegetables ('grønt')) from 30.12.2019 to 13.11.2023. We also conducted a Retriever[1] search in more than 2,000 print and digital editorial media, radio and television files. The search yielded 142 articles. These were read and coded in a time-structured and issue-based scheme to reflect the chronology of events. Additionally, the Farmers' Union collected 70 articles relating to Covid-19 digitally on their website,[2] the first of which was published on 10 March 2019 and the last on 21 September 2021. Finally, Government historical archives[3] gave access to all speeches, texts, questions and answers about Covid-19. These were read, coded, and extracted into a time narrative on agriculture, seasonal work, and Covid-19.

The methods used for the article's narrative analysis are inspired by situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2015), which 'allows researchers to draw together discourse and agency, action and structure, image, text and context, history and the present moment – to analyse complex stations of enquiry' (Clarke, 2003: 554), as well as the 'revealed dependence' of agriculture on migrant labour. The unit of analysis is the situation per se, the research question(s) address the various elements identified within these situations, and the discourse analysis highlights how reality is constructed, maintained, and/or challenged (see e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The method is systematic and helps structure the issues at stake, the human and non-human elements that are evident in the situation, the relations between actors (human and non-human), and the discourses.

[1] https://www.retrievergroup.com/product-research
[2] https://www.bondelaget.no/tema/koronaviruset/
[3] https://www.regjeringen.no/en/historical-archive/id115322/

For instance, the question of defining migrant workers as essential to agriculture is part of a discursive creation in texts and as narratives that presents mindsets in use and actions taken.
The analytical method consists of three steps. The first step is to identify which actors are involved in the situation and what role they might have. The second step is to reveal the central issues and topics in the situation. The third step is to analyse how actors and issues are positioned. In this process, the concept of discourse helps us reveal, interpret, and communicate on how an issue arrives at the decision-making table, which power relations are active, and which elements are ignored or silenced.

Excerpts from news and media are presented to illustrate which actors were publicly active and which ones were invited to participate and form the discourse. The dominant actors during the initial stages of the pandemic had a huge impact on what turned out to be the dominant narrative in the question of food security and self-sufficiency. The analysis is presented through two distinct narratives, the 'business-as-usual' narrative and the 'access-to-labour-being-a-big-challenge' narrative. The latter is the dominant narrative and was elaborated through three measures that were constructed to solve the problem. Before turning to what became the dominant narrative in Norway during COVID-19 – the link between lack of seasonal workers, i.e. migrants, and food security and self-sufficiency (Farmers' Union, 2020b) – we look at the statistics on the use of migrant labour on Norwegian farms.

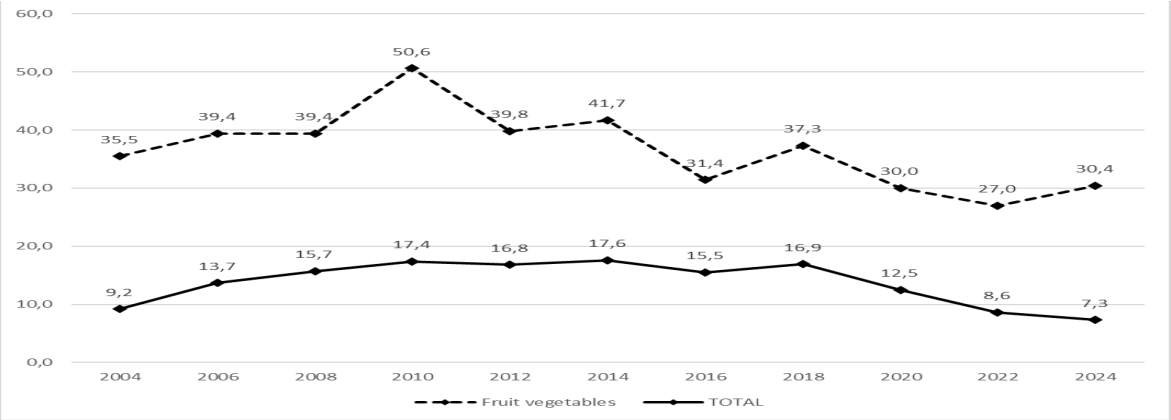
Migrant workers in Norwegian agriculture

Norway is fully integrated into the EU market via the European Economic Agreement (EEA). With the EU enlargement in 2004, EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe could also access labour markets in the EU/EEA area, to the benefit of bargain-winning markets and the cost of labour (Moses, 2021). Unprecedented numbers of workers migrated to more affluent parts of the EU, including Norway (McAreavey, 2017; Rye and Scott, 2018). Access to the EU's inner market allowed for increased access to migrant labour for Norwegian agriculture (Rye and Slettebak, 2020), with an increase in both the number and share of farms hiring seasonal labour from abroad. From the mid-2010s however, the numbers started to decline, both in agriculture and in other sectors. One reason for these changes was reduced wealth and income differences between Norway and the migrants' home countries (ibid.).

The number of Norwegian farms using seasonal labour and their dependence on migrant workers have been monitored in the Trends in Norwegian Agriculture (Trends hereafter) survey since 2004. Trends is a biannual representative survey on Norwegian farmers conducted by Ruralis (Zahl-Thanem and Melås, 2020; 2022).[4] The 2024 survey (for the production year 2023) shows that for Norwegian agriculture overall, 7% of farms hired migrant workers, that is, 2,700 out of 37,561 farms (Figure 1). This is down from a peak in 2014 when close to 18% (7,744 out of 43,022) of farms hired workers from abroad.

[4] Respondents in Trends are drawn randomly from a national database on farm properties and primary producers. On average, between 1,100 and 1,800 farmers have returned their questionnaires every year. The average return rates for the period 2004-2022 vary between 55 and 34 percent. Although the response rate has gradually declined over the years, representation and validity are still considered good (see Zahl-Thanem and Melås, 2020; 2022).

Figure 1. Percentage of farms hiring immigrant workers. Total, fruit/vegetable sector, 2004 to 2024



Source: Trends in Norwegian Agriculture

The production sector with the largest share of migrant workers is fruit and vegetable production, similar to the situation in other countries. The latest figures show that one-third of all fruit and vegetable farms depended on migrant workers, down from a peak in 2010 when half of Norwegian fruit and vegetable farms hired migrant workers. In absolute numbers, this corresponds to around a thousand farms in 2010 and 700 in 2024 (production year 2023).

The Trends survey also contains value-related questions, i.e., attitudes to migrant workers and worker rights. In 2004, 40% of Norwegian farmers agreed with the statement 'We should rely more on migrant workers in the future' (authors' translation from Norwegian). By 2022, this had dropped to 29%. Furthermore, in 2004, 37% of Norwegian farmers found it acceptable that migrant workers in agriculture were paid less than Norwegian farm workers. In 2016, 23% were of the same opinion (Zahl-Thanem and Melås, 2022). Although farms in Norway have become fewer and larger due to restructuring, and the average number of migrant workers per farm has increased, it is fair to say that this is a declining trend. It is also evident that farmers' attitudes are changing, and that there is a reduced acceptance of lower standards for migrant workers.

Narrative on numbers

When it comes to the number of migrant workers in Norway, both currently and historically, it is more difficult to obtain accurate figures. Numbers are not recorded reliably in Trends, and there is no easily accessible public register. The lack of accurate data on migrant workers in agriculture became evident during the pandemic.

Based on the number and content of news, lobby and policy documents related to migrant labour during the COVID-19 period, there was a public impression that many farm workers were needed to secure Norwegian food production and maintain the self-sufficiency rate. An early estimate of 100,000 seasonal migrant workers needed in Norway was debated on the national TV channel NRK on 16 March (NRK, 2020a). This was however only an estimate and was not based on public statistics or farm reporting. A few days later, the Farmers' Union stipulated that the number was 20,000, arguing that migrant workers should be classified as 'experts', mainly within fruit and vegetable production, hence qualifying for free border passage under Norwegian regulations during the pandemic (Farmers' Union, 2020a). On 26 May 2020, the national fruit and vegetable coop, Gartnerhallen, stipulated that 15,000 workers were needed to obtain pre-COVID-19 production levels (Hatlevik, 2020). On 30 March 2020, the Minister of Agriculture and Food stated that the fruit and vegetable industry needed 'many thousands' (Government 2020a). On 1 April 2020, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration reported figures from 2019 that showed EEC/EU citizens made up the largest group of seasonal workers (an unspecified number), but that 3,700 workers from countries outside the EU/EEA area came to Norway for seasonal work, 70% of them to work in agriculture. Half of these were Vietnamese (1,250, author's calculation) and 30% Ukrainians (750, author's calculation). Statistics Norway (SSB) figures for the 2020 season confirmed these patterns: most foreign seasonal labour comes from Eastern Europe (Poland 47%, Lithuania 13%), 10% from Ukraine, and 10% from Vietnam. These groups work mainly in

horticulture (Gundersen and Myrli, 2021).

Based on these various numbers and incomplete public statistics, we estimate that the number of migrant workers in Norwegian agriculture at the start of the pandemic was a lot lower than what the agricultural sector, government, and the main news media reported. Furthermore, these migrants were directed to a small and specialised part of Norwegian food production, not to most Norwegian farms.

The 'business as usual' narrative

Norway is dependent on imports for more than half of the calories consumed by its population but is self-sufficient year-round in dairy products, red and white meat, eggs and fish. However, much of this production depends on imported proteins in feed concentrate. According to the nation's largest fruit and vegetable wholesaler Bama, and the fruit and vegetable coop Gartnerhallen, Norway is 34% self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables (annual average). In season (May to October), domestic producers cover 70% of national fruit and vegetable demand (Bama, 2020).

The COVID-19 lock-down affected all economic sectors. Hospital capacity and the spread of the virus were key issues in national risk assessment and dominated the news coverage and public debate. However, attention was also drawn to food security and self-sufficiency-related issues. During the first months of the pandemic, Norwegian authorities communicated two mutually exclusive narratives simultaneously. On the one hand, they reassured the public that food production would continue with little disturbance and with no reduced access to food in the stores. On the other hand, through a set of statements and regulations, the authorities argued that access to migrant seasonal labour would be crucial to uphold domestic food production levels.

The Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries (NFD, responsible for food supply) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (LMD, responsible for food production) developed the narrative that, despite closed borders and disturbances in major agriculture value chains, there would be 'enough food for everybody', that 'food production runs as normal' (Government, 2020, b and c), and that access to imported goods would not be reduced (NRK, 2020b). The Norwegian Agricultural Agency followed up this reassuring narrative by reporting that the Norwegian food supply, both from domestic production and from imports, was functioning well, despite logistical challenges and value chain disturbances due to the pandemic (Fafo Østforum, 2020). In May 2020, the Foreign Minister I. Søreide presented a declaration in support of the multilateral trading system and the WTO's central role in cooperation and solidarity to ensure the supply of goods and services in the fight against COVID-19 (together with 42 other ministers) (Government, 2020d).

When presenting the national budget on 12 June 2020, the government stated that agriculture had been 'relatively little affected by the [pandemic] compared to several other industries', and that agriculture as a whole 'is not experiencing a drop in sales, perhaps rather a certain temporary increase in the market due to the halt in cross-border trade', except for industries that deliver to hotels and restaurants (Horeca) due to reduced access to seasonal labour (Government, 2020e). Based on official statements, one can thus assume that Norwegian food security was perceived as good in terms of availability and access for the population, owing to own production and good trade relations, but also that self-sufficiency was somewhat affected.

Dependency narrative: Access to labour is a big challenge

Alongside the narrative of undisturbed food supply and sustained food security for the Norwegian population, both the government and food sector representatives constructed a second and opposite narrative: food production (and self-sufficiency) would be harmed if the borders were completely closed. On 16 March 2020, fruit and vegetable sector representatives called for a national effort to secure the Norwegian food supply (Bama, 2020). When several sectors had to let their workers go due to the lockdown, agriculture was calling for more labour. On 17 March 2020, the Farmers' Union established a special task force to deal with labour shortages due to border closures, and labour recruitment became a priority (Farmers' Union, 2020b).

Together with food industry organisations, the Farmers' Union put forward three different proposals to mitigate the negative effects of border closures.

The first proposal was to intensify recruitment of domestic labour, with students and laid-off workers as target groups. Because Norwegians would not be willing to accept wage levels normally offered to migrant workers, work conditions and wages had to be improved. Hence, on 23 March 2020, the Farmers' Union submitted a proposal to three ministries to establish a free pass for Norwegian workers who had been dismissed or laid off due to COVID-19 (Farmers' Union, 2020c). This scheme was needed to remedy the fact that the minimum wage in agriculture was lower than unemployment benefits. The government's response was to allow workers laid off due to COVID-19 to maintain their unemployment benefits whilst at the same time receiving minimum pay for working in agriculture. The scheme was adopted on 31 March 2020, and continued in 2021 (Government, 2020h). However, many farmers protested this scheme, claiming that Norwegian workers lacked the expertise and experience of migrant workers, many of whom had a 20-year record as seasonal labour. One farmer characterised Norwegian farm labour as 'lacking respect' for work, and 'too comfortable' to be reliable (Bondebladet, 2020).

The free-pass arrangement was also met with criticism from outside agriculture. Trade unions argued that one reason for foreign labour dependence was the wage level and the de facto social-dumping-conditions in their contracts (Vermes, 2020). Former agriculture researcher, S.A. Lie, pointed out a mismatch in the farm sector, where the sector depends on a planned economy with production subsidies, but where farmers as employers behave like neoliberals (Vermes, 2020). An additional concern was that, with more Norwegians with higher salaries entering agriculture, food prices would increase, and farm incomes would drop. In a statement, then Minister of Agriculture and Food, O. Bollestad, replied that wage-related matters were to be solved by the parties involved (employer representatives and the unions) in the labour regime. The role of the government, Bollestad stated, was not to intervene in wage negotiations, but to facilitate the availability of enough labour for agriculture (Government, 2021a).

Despite the free pass scheme, labour demands were not met, particularly in the fruit and vegetable sector. Therefore, a second proposal from the agricultural sector emerged: exemptions from travel bans for migrant labour in agriculture. On 21 March 2020, the government was working on changes to allow those migrant workers already situated in Norway to extend their stay (Government, 2020f). The main argument presented was that the fruit and vegetable sector was a specialised industry that needed labour with expertise and experience or, Minister Bollestad had put it: 'We need foreign labour with relevant and appropriate skills' (Government, 2020f). On 30 March 2020, the Minister of Justice allowed exemptions for travel bans for migrant workers from EU/EEA countries so that they could 'more easily contribute' to Norwegian agriculture (TV2, 2020). A travel requirement was a two-week quarantine. On 9 April 2020, the borders were also opened to labour with non-critical functions from the EU/EEA zone, and from 6 May 2020, all foreign seasonal workers who were working in agriculture could enter Norway (Government, 2020g). In June 2020, the borders opened for a period for everyone who was going to work or study in Norway, and many believed the COVID-19 situation was under control.

In January 2021, the borders closed again in the second wave of COVID-19-related restrictions. This time, exceptions to the travel ban could be made only if strictly necessary to ensure continuity of critical societal functions (Government, 2021c). This was seemingly a much tougher regulation than that of the previous year. On 25 February 2021, the government and the agricultural sector again realised that access to seasonal workers would be a huge challenge and started working on mitigating measures. On 26 March 2021, new regulations allowed foreign labour crucial for maintaining 'sound operations in the fruit and vegetable sector' to apply for entry despite border closures (Government, 2021d). On 15 April 2021, there was a 'no' to opening borders, but shortly afterwards, on 21 April 2021, a temporary change was agreed, for the renewal of residence permits to seasonal workers already staying in Norway during the COVID-19 pandemic. Borders were closed for longer than in 2021.

On 5 July 2021 there was a border relief for entry of foreign labour. Several countries had already been granted entry based on a traffic light scheme that provided information about infection rates in each country. On 17 June 2021, warnings were issued of a 30 per cent strawberry 'deficit' in the market due to a lack of seasonal workers. When the opening of the borders for seasonal migrating workers was partly justified in terms of skills developed from work in previous years, it turned out that the authorities also had to change the requirement from a minimum of three years of previous experience to a minimum of one year, to obtain enough labour. Hence, the expertise argument was ultimately set aside.

On 20 September 2021, a new scheme was introduced to allow seasonal workers to stay in Norway for the rest of the year if they could not return home due to entry restrictions in their home country. This was effectively an automatic extension of their work visa period (Government 2021e), before most entry restrictions were lifted towards the end of the year.

A third measure from early 2020 was a risk-reducing financial support scheme for the fruit and vegetable sector. In a letter to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the Farmers' Union and the fruit and vegetable sector argued that it was important to start spring planting from a societal food supply security perspective. A scheme that included compensation for crop losses in labour-intensive fruit and vegetable productions due to a lack of workers was established in April 2020 and would be valid for the rest of the year. A similar scheme was established in August 2020, applicable for the 2021-season (Government, 2020e). Numbers from the Norwegian Agricultural Agency (private correspondence) showed 12 applications submitted under this risk-relief scheme for the 2020 season, of which 11 came from berry producers and one from a vegetable producer. For the 2021 season, 37 applications were submitted: 29 from berry producers, 7 from vegetable producers, and one from a fruit producer. These are low figures compared to the number of farms in total cultivating that produce. One explanation might be that the access-to-labour-schemes were so efficient that losses due to labour shortages were not an issue. Another explanation is that possible losses were covered by other arrangements.

DISCUSSION

In this article we have considered how migrant workers came to be seen in government discourses as sufficiently necessary to Norwegian food security to justify their exclusion from basic protections imposed during the pandemic, thereby contributing to their precarity as workers. We have analysed COVID-19 policies to show how the government's handling of migrant labour as regards food security and Norwegian self-sufficiency entailed exceptions in the Norwegian agricultural regime.

Despite reassurances to the public that food production could continue undisturbed and that access to food would not be compromised, the Norwegian government and the agricultural sector opted for regulations to allow seasonal labour to enter during a period of heavy travel restrictions. This 'two-sided communication' from the government during COVID-19 was quite striking. In one sense, both statements turned out to be true at the same time. For most Norwegians, access to food, both in volume and in quality, remained more or less the same during the pandemic despite disturbances to global value chains and periods of labour shortages in Norwegian agriculture. At the same time, farmers had periodic problems linked to access to labour. Since migrant workers, particularly in the fruit and vegetable sector, were defined early on as 'essential', labour shortages did not hit hard. The recruitment scheme aimed at Norwegian students and laid-off workers also helped to reduce potential disturbances in food production. Yet the government, agricultural organisations, and food industry representatives created a narrative that linked access to migrant workers and food self-sufficiency, to justify the implementation of measures that could qualify as exceptional. Important actors in creating this narrative were the Farmers' Union, with its 6,000 members, Bama, which is the largest fruit and vegetable wholesaler in Norway, and the Gartnerhallen co-op. During the pandemic, representatives from a relatively small part of the agricultural sector engaged in energetic lobbying, and on several occasions the

Minister of Food and Agriculture argued along the same lines as the organisations and industry representatives. In this article, we have shown how the government responded to these organisations' requests and interests and established free pass schemes that made it easier for unemployed Norwegians to work in agriculture and eventually allowed migrant workers to enter despite closed borders. Both politicians and the agricultural sector defended exemptions regarding food security and self-sufficiency. Compared to the relatively low and declining share of Norwegian farms hiring migrant workers – around 10% at the start of the pandemic – it is fair to say that a small but powerful part of the Norwegian society and the agricultural sector achieved far bigger concessions than their size would otherwise suggest.

Claiming exceptionalism

Reviewing both long-term regulations such as the minimum wage and exemptions agreed during COVID-19, there is clear evidence that Norwegian agriculture is still subject to policy exceptions. Along the lines suggested by Skogstad (1998) and Daugbjerg and Swinbank (2009), agriculture was treated as a unique economic sector of special national interest or importance. In the narrative that became dominant, the matter of national importance was the threat to food security, with a potential labour deficit as the root cause. The fact that the government simultaneously communicated that food access and supply were not in danger, did not change the outcome: exceptions to travel restrictions were deemed necessary to mitigate a potential threat to national food security. What the special arrangements during COVID-19 – measures aimed at the labour situation and risk-relieving financial schemes – had in common were the interests of the producers and the food industry. Agriculture was given attention and enjoyed policies few other sectors could hope for, thus confirming the conclusions of Grant (1995) who underlined a central feature in agricultural exceptionalism, namely that industry and producer interests are given precedence in policy making (Grant 1995). The regulations and policies put in place, and the position of the main actors in the agricultural sector, reflected the notion that institutional settings in a regime affect policymaking. In regimes where exceptionalism is institutionalised, measures and policies are sheltered by the regime, and when new policy areas or challenges emerge, as in a pandemic, there is a tendency for the existing regime to shape the various public policy outcomes (Farsund and Daugbjerg, 2017).

Precarity

Our empirical data and analyses indicate that Norway depends on a precariat workforce in agriculture, both symbolically and in practice. Although the proportion of farms that hire migrant workers, both overall and in the fruit and vegetable sector, is in decline, Norway has food producers and productions that are dependent on this arrangement. After Norwegian agriculture rationalised almost all hired labour out of Norwegian agriculture (Bjørkhaug and Blekesaune, 2007; 2008), parts of the fruit and vegetable sector were re-proletarianised (Rye, et. al. 2018), leaving it with a precarious group of workers. We can argue that these are precarious in Kalleberg's (2018) sense of the term, that is, work that falls outside society's norms of what is accepted as fair. The fact that few Norwegians apply for these jobs is one indication of the substandard conditions in the sector and, even among the farmers, there is a steady decline in support for hiring migrant workers for less pay than Norwegians. Whilst precarity might not be the purpose of governmental arrangements, the public debate, statements, and lobbying from the main stakeholders in agriculture revealed a striking silence and lack of concern for the welfare of the individual migrant worker taking on extra risk during a global pandemic. Access to foreign labour was taken almost for granted. The major national concern, and the brunt of the criticism levied at the government, concerned its ability to implement policies that would secure food production and supply. Challenges pertaining to labour conditions were pushed downwards, for the farmers and their organisations to manage.

We also argue that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a dependence on precarity workers in a more symbolic sense. The agricultural sector, in collaboration with the government, carved out arrangements for seasonal labour without consulting with the workers themselves. When migrant workers turned out to play a major role during COVID-19, they did so without having any real agency in the situation. They became 'invisible'

(Kalleberg, 2018). This represents a breach of what is normally described as 'The Norwegian Model', in which workers have a central and permanent place at the negotiating table in the labour regime (Nymoen, 2017). The focus of the narratives was on food security and self-sufficiency, with the danger of increased food prices and revenue loss for farmers experiencing a shortage of workers. One could argue that, since migrant workers are hired by individual farms and there is no national organisation representing them, the state and the agricultural organisations lack a partner to talk to. This, however, does not free the leading politicians and agricultural organisations from raising concerns over lower standards for migrant workers. Hence, if not an end goal, precarity is an effect of current policies.

Food security and self-sufficiency

When food security was addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Norway, it was the domestic needs for state preparedness and self-sufficiency that were at stake, not the single citizens' physical access to food. Therefore, Norwegian food security was never under threat, according to a standard definition of the concept: "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs…" (FAO, 2023). Availability of food became key and was ensured by the government and food industry throughout the pandemic, through domestic production and trade agreements. COVID-19 was even seen as possibly having a positive impact on Norwegian food production because border closures deprived people of the possibility of cross-border shopping in Sweden, which generated added demand for domestic produce. Although there has long been an agreement over the main goals of agricultural policies across the political spectrum, we could see some political divisions emerging between the conservative government and the opposition parties in the political centre and to the left. The government presented a contingency policy for agriculture throughout the country 'in our natural productions' and argued that, with rural and small-scale measures, this could be maintained, and in combination with functioning international trade 'we see that we have done well' (Government, 2020e).

The opposition highlighted the vulnerability of agriculture and food supply that COVID-19 had revealed, linked to dependence on seasonal labour. The opposition further argued for increased efforts to strengthen food security and self-sufficiency, with an escalation plan to boost domestic production – particularly feed proteins, fruit and vegetables – and reduce import dependence. With this, the opposition presented an even greater emphasis on food sovereignty which would also mean continued dependence on migrant workers. By suggesting these various exceptional measures, both the government and the opposition contributed to increased politicisation of food security during the pandemic.

Clapp et al. (2022) raised questions about whether the existing understanding of food security was sufficient to embrace the sustainability of the food system, and the actors involved, not only as consumers. Our research confirms that food security is a powerful concept, but also confirms the weaknesses of using the concept solely to ensure national self-sufficiency. Recognising agency, empowerment, and the equality of all participants in the food system can result in profound changes. Including agricultural labour in an egalitarian social democratic model can also strengthen the achievement of the current goals of production and supply of food. In the situation we have looked at here, only the surface issues were addressed, whilst the financial challenges in agriculture have remained.

In their eagerness to ensure the legitimacy of the Norwegian agricultural model and the greatest possible degree of self-sufficiency, both the agricultural sector and national authorities ignored the genearl rules of the game in Norwegian society. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that Norway finds itself in a situation where a group of workers has precarious working conditions, in contrast to the rights which Norwegian workers enjoy. When addressing migrant workers' rights, none of the regimes have taken responsibility for this or believe that it is their obligation. In the agricultural sector, it has been argued that the working conditions of all employees in Norway are the responsibility of all the parties in the labour regime, whilst the main actors in the labour regime believe that the welfare of farm workers is the responsibility of the farmers employing them. If this is not changed, there is little hope that the working conditions of migrant workers in Norway

will improve in the short run.

CONCLUSION

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Norway, food security was high on the public agenda. Both the authorities and the food industry assured the population that there were no problems related to food supply; yet, at the same time, a narrative was developed that food security could be threatened by a lack of seasonal labour for agriculture. An impression was created that Norwegian agriculture was dependent on foreign seasonal labour. With hindsight, we know that Norwegian food security was never threatened and that consumers' access to food remained unchanged. However, the pandemic contributed to an intensification of the debate surrounding food security, preparedness issues, and vulnerabilities in the food system – but did not contribute to a renewed debate over agricultural exceptionalism or the welfare of migrant workers in agriculture.

In this article we considered how migrant workers came to be depicted in government discourses as sufficiently necessary to Norwegian food security to justify their exclusion from basic protections during the pandemic, contributing to their precarity as workers. We found that the 'dependency' narrative was not misleading in the sense that large parts of Norwegian fruit and vegetable production do depend on migrant workers and that, without this labour, self-sufficiency in those sectors would drop significantly. Actors in the agricultural sector, including the Minister for Food and Agriculture, O. Bollestad, recognised the added risk that migrant workers took on due to travelling during the pandemic, but argued that national food security was more important (Bollestad, 2020). Estimates based on public data, and data from the bi-annual farmer survey Trends (Zahl-Thanem and Melås, 2020; 2022), show that approximately 10,000-12,500 migrant workers were in Norway at the start of the pandemic. If these workers had not been available and not replaced by domestic labour, it would of course have affected the Norwegian self-sufficiency rate.

Since migrant workers were allowed entry relatively quickly, it is difficult to know whether the dependency narrative was misleading or not. One could argue that, since only 10% of Norwegian farms hired migrant workers at the start of the pandemic (down to 7% in 2023), a travel ban for this group as well should not have affected the food security of a western capitalist democracy with high purchasing power and established trade arrangements.

In this article, we have shown that the Norwegian government constructed a food security discourse to justify exceptional policy measures, such as unconventional financial measures to recruit Norwegian students and laid-off workers to agriculture, exemption from travel bans for migrant workers in agriculture, and a compensation scheme for farmers experiencing yield losses due to a shortage of labour during harvest. These arrangements prioritising production at the expense of workers' welfare were sought by representatives from the farming sector and the food industry. Of interest, and in line with Farsund and Daugbjerg (2017), is the way these dynamics are present and visible even in times without the pandemic.

This study has shown that migrant workers were visible as a resource but invisible as actors with agency during the pandemic; they did not participate in negotiations about risk and labour conditions. Our data show no evidence that leading politicians and agricultural industries were concerned about migrants having to take on extra risk by travelling across borders and being away from their families. Based on these findings, we argue that Norway has an established precariat of migrant seasonal workers, both symbolically and in practice, and has food producers (farmers) who depend on this arrangement. Migrant seasonal labour in agriculture was initially understood as essential for Norwegian food production and food security, and we have shown that this is, at best, a truth for the highly industrialised part of Norwegian fruit and vegetable production. Our research shows that there are powerful regime actors – the Farmers' Union, agricultural co-ops, the fruit and vegetable wholesalers, and the supermarket chains – that can strongly influence Norwegian agricultural policy and production. If they wanted to, these actors could also use their influence to improve working conditions for migrant workers in the Norwegian food system.

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