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Embedded information and support: Foreign seasonal farm workers' strategies at the margins of the Finnish welfare state

Abstract

In this article we analyze foreign seasonal berry and vegetable pickers' strategies as regards securing their living and working conditions at the margins of the Finnish welfare state. The use of foreign berry and vegetable pickers is officially approved by the Finnish state. Many concrete practices of the picking business verge on the boundaries of "formal" and "informal" the two concepts. We conclude that in spite of the potential gains working in Finland offers to foreign pickers, the risks associated with the work are diverted to the individual employee. The risks are not shared between the employee and the welfare state, which is regarded as a central feature of the Nordic welfare model. In this precarious situation "weak ties" become an important source of information and security for the foreign pickers.

Introduction

In this article we analyze foreign seasonal berry and vegetable pickers' strategies as regards securing their living and working conditions at the margins of the Finnish welfare state. Foreign pickers, who are working on a temporary basis in Finland, are by large excluded from Finnish welfare state's protection. Historically picking used to be a summer activity carried by natives, who worked on a temporary basis in the farms in order to earn some income. Nowadays the picking business operates according to a different logic: pickers are mainly foreigners who originate from Russia, but also other eastern European countries and Estonia. They work temporarily in Finland with particular visas that set conditions regarding for example the length of their stay, insurance requirements and minimum income -except for the EU/EEA nationals who are covered by free EU-mobility (see Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2013). The visa regulations do not entitle to the national social insurance provided by the Finnish state and municipalities. Instead pickers need to purchase a private insurance in order to be allowed to work in the country.

Our main focus lies in the analysis of informal networks, which the pickers rely on as a strategy to find employment, as a form of social security, and as a means for protecting living and working conditions. The aim of the article is to answer *how* the foreign berry pickers gain knowledge regarding employment, and what their work and social security related strategies are during their stay in Finland. In other words, we examine with what kind of formal or informal measures do the pickers try to secure their living and working conditions in Finland?

As a theoretical point of departure we take Mark Granovetter's (1985) understanding of the concept *embeddedness*, which stresses that economic relations are embedded in concrete social networks and do

not exist in an abstract idealized market. Despite the limitations of Granovetter's theory in general terms (cf. Nee 2005, 52-53; Smelser & Swedberg 2005, 15) it is particularly useful in analysing situations of temporary stay. We argue in Granovetter's terms that social networks and interpersonal *weak ties* are essential for the pickers in getting work related information and securing their stay in Finland. Weak ties are according to Granovetter essential in transmission of novel information in social systems such as labour markets. Weak ties are characterised, in opposition to *strong ties*, by not requiring large time commitments, emotional intensity or intimacy, or history of reciprocal favours (Granovetter 1973). In terms of the Finnish labour market context there has been a shift towards an increasingly competitive capitalism, where role of the state is to enhance firms' possibilities of being competitive (see Heiskala & Luhtakallio 2006; Kettunen 2008). This is visible in the increased short-term labour migration from abroad, especially in the construction sector and agriculture (see Von Hertzen-Oosi, Harju, Haake & Aro 2009; Alho 2013; Helander, Holley & Uttana forthcoming). Europe-wide there has been a re-emergence of a sort of a *gast-arbeiter* system. Temporary migrant workers are utilized as sort of economic buffer to serve the fluctuating demand of labour (cf. Katzenstein 1985; Alho 2013; Jauer; Liebig; Martin & Puhani 2014; Helander, Holley & Uttana forthcoming).

The Nordic welfare states –to which Finland is generally categorized – are commonly characterized as universalist, with relatively generous and comprehensive welfare provisions from “cradle to grave” (e.g. Ervasti & Fridberg & Hjerm & Ringdal 2008, 5-8). Nevertheless, the temporary migrant picker in Finland is by large outside welfare state's benefits and risk protection.

Previous research (Helander, Holley & Uttana 2014) has shown that foreign workers' temporary stay, affects not only their rights to welfare state protection, but also their motivation of getting knowledge regarding possibilities of receiving benefits and social security provided by the welfare state. The temporary migrant picker works with a picker-visa, intends to stay only a short time-period in Finland – usually the harvesting season– when the demand for farm workers peak. The time span of the stay puts earning money in the first place of priorities and other aspects of life become less relevant and interesting (cf. Piore 1979).

The article is organised as follows. First we describe the working logic of the farm berry industry and why it has become so dependent on foreign workers. Then we introduce the research design, which is followed by the empirical findings. The concluding chapter summarizes and discusses the key findings.

The berry and vegetable picking industry: employers' dependence on migrant workers

Farm berry and vegetable picking is a labour-intensive business, as berries and vegetables have to be picked by hand. Thus, the farms need seasonal workers. There are plenty of examples throughout history

where this kind of demand of labour met has been by temporary migrants. For instance the majority of U.S. farm workers are foreign born (National Agricultural Workers Survey). . Employer demands for temporal flexibility required in seasonal work are commonly achieved by recruiting from abroad (e.g. Caviedes 2010). However, in the Finnish context, temporary migration from abroad is a relatively recent phenomenon (Reference: Sorainen?). The public discussion and academic publications on temporary labor migration to the rural areas has in Finland focused on wild-berry picking. Valkonen and Rantanen (2011a; 2011b) have published on the phenomenon of temporary foreign wild berry pickers' work in Finland. However, picking by temporary migrants – which is in the focus of this article – has not been researched in Finland. Farm vegetable and farm berry picking functions according to a different logic than wild-berry picking. Wild-berry pickers are private entrepreneurs who pick berries with everyman's right, and sell their product to wholesalers (Valkonen & Rantanen 2011a, 21-22; 2011b). Farm pickers, however, are *wage earners* with a different status as regards work and rights to social security.

The Finnish harvesting season is short and intensive consisting, depending on the weather, of maximum a couple of months. Farm picking is a rather monotonous, physically demanding, and low-paid job. Furthermore, picking is conducted outdoors even in poor weather. As a consequence of the increase in living standards the farmers cannot find natives for the job—as was the case in previous decades. In this situation the farmers' strategy has been to recruit workers from abroad.

Picking is economically attractive for Russians and other east European nationalities as income-levels in their home countries are lower. The farm owners we interviewed, stressed that hiring foreigners is a necessity for the business. Thus, in spite of the foreign picker being in a marginal position in relation to the Finnish society and the Finnish welfare state, paradoxically (s)he is of central importance as providers of labor to the berry and vegetable picking industry, which nowadays is dependent of non-native seasonal workers from Russia, Ukraine and Estonia (interviews with the farmers). Some of the farm owners underlined that berries have to be sold to a competitive price, especially when Finnish farmers compete with production from other countries such as Poland. For example, the competitiveness advantage of Estonian farm produced strawberries is due to the lower costs of labour in Estonia (see Koivisto 2005a; 2005b). Using piece rate as a basis for payment is common in agricultural work when the crop being picked, because it is easily weighed and measured (Roka 2009). This was also the case in the farms we visited.

In this competitive situation paying higher earnings in order to attract Finnish workers does not seem as a viable option as it would raise labour costs, and costs of products in the global market and hence decrease competitiveness.

The berry business has in many cases in the media been associated with shady arrangements and exploitation of workers. Nevertheless, the reported problems have been mainly related to *wild-berry* picking, and not *farm berry* and vegetable picking, which we concentrate on. Nevertheless, farm picking has also gained some negative publicity due to problems regarding pickers' working conditions (Voima 2005/10; Maaseudun tulevaisuus 7.3.2011). It is not our aim here to assess whether this image of the farm picking business is accurate. Instead we are interested in assessing the strategies of the worker (and the employer) from his/her subjective perspective. The research design –that is presented in the following section– has been planned in order to give a voice to those in the work process; the migrant workers and the farmers. In addition, we have interviewed Government employment officials, in order to contrast it with the pickers' view.

Research design

The empirical part of the study is based on a five day field work conducted in central Finland in August 2011. During these days altogether 28 agricultural workers were interviewed at several different farms. Most informants worked with berry picking (mainly strawberries but also blueberries and rasp berries). Some pickers worked with vegetable picking and packing (e.g. salad and lettuce). Some worked in addition with forestry work. The majority of the pickers intended to stay only maximum few months in Finland, but some had stayed/intended to stay for longer periods working with various tasks at the farms. For the sake of clarity we consider them a single category and will refer to all of them as “pickers”. The interviews were conducted in a structured fashion. A list of questions and themes were discussed in a predetermined order. Nevertheless, the informants had the possibility to extend the discussion by taking up issues, which they considered important. We were interested in the pickers' strategies of getting access to the farms, their experiences and need of social protection, their strategies regarding potential or experienced risks related to being involved in seasonal agricultural work..

In addition to interviews with the seasonal workers, the research group interviewed also seven farmers and two representatives for authorities in order to gain background information and in order to contrast the pickers' views with the aforementioned groups. Nevertheless, the main focus in the article is on the pickers' strategies. The group consisted of three researchers aided by interpreters (Finnish-Russian-Finnish and Finnish-Estonian-Finnish). Additionally the research group based its findings on document research.

We acquired access to the pickers by contacting farmers who had participated in a rural development project run by the Ruralia Institute of the University of Helsinki. We asked the farmers whether it would be possible to interview some of their foreign workers. With only a few exceptions, the farmers agreed to

participate and allowed the research group to visit their farm in order to interview. This way of gaining informants may have resulted in a biased sample, as farms with poor working and living conditions might have been left out. The research material provides, nevertheless, plenty of information regarding particular dimensions in seasonal work. Many pickers we interviewed had experience from previous years from other farms and could consequently comment broadly on temporary farm work.

Most of our informants (excluding 7 farmers and 9 government officials) came from Russia (#23), with additionally four Estonians and one Ukrainian informant. Simultaneous interpretation was utilized during the interviews, which also lessened the possible flexibility and adjustment of questions in the interview situation. Most of our informants were women and their age distribution was between approximately twenty and sixty years of age.

Most of the interviews have been transcribed and translated into Finnish. They have been analyzed with qualitative content analysis, and the interviewees are considered as “witnesses and informants” of circumstances and conditions. We guaranteed the interviewees anonymity. Some of the pickers’ stressed the importance of this aspect. We also emphasized that the interviewees did not have to answer our questions if they did not want to. The names of the berry farms and farmers are also withheld. In research interviews a general challenge is that the interviewees tend to present their life in a more positive way than what the actual situation is (see Roos 1987, 213-216; Kortteinen 1992, 37-52). However, we did not experience this kind of a problem as the interviewees quite openly told us about the problems they had faced as the following chapters will illustrate.

The process of getting access to Finland

The pickers’ process of getting access to the Finnish labour market commenced with gaining knowledge of entry to the farms, visa and insurance requirements (with the exception of Estonians who as EU-citizens did not need visas) and becoming informed about the working conditions. Their motivation of coming to work in Finland was mainly economical, i.e. higher wages than in their home country. In addition, some Russian pickers claimed that Finnish employers treat their employees better than is the case in Russia, which the pickers obviously valued. Some pickers stressed further that working in a foreign country also provided them valuable personal experiences. Some of the pickers came in groups, and valued, in addition to the earning opportunities, the social aspect of spending some time together in a foreign country.

For the pickers in the first stage of the migration process, especially before the first stay in Finland, institutional arrangements in relation to firms, organizations, public authorities etc. play a larger role than informal personal networks. However, some pickers’ also utilized informal networks in this particular stage. Many of the Russian pickers relied on recruitment agencies when coming to work for the first time

in Finland. Those who had worked previously in Finland, were not dependent on Russian private recruitment agencies. They had developed direct connections to the farms and could arrange their connection to the farms themselves and received an invitation to work at a farm, which facilitated them in the visa procedure. Those pickers who had friends or acquaintances working at the farms were able to get access to farm work without agencies. A Russian picker for instance had gotten knowledge of work opportunities at Finnish farms from her daughter's friends. In a similar fashion, an Estonian picker had gotten knowledge about a work opportunity in the farms from her class mate whose father worked in Finland. This highlights the importance of weak ties in accessing work at farms.

Many of the Russian pickers claimed that they had been duped by Russian agencies in terms of false and excessive promises regarding how much work would be available. One interviewee claimed that she had paid 1000 dollars to a recruiting agency only for getting access to the a farm. This is a considerable sum in terms of the pickers' income, and considering the fact that the fee only covered for the trip to Finland, visa and insurance. Those pickers who had direct or indirect ties to the Finnish farms were not dependent on the Russian agencies, and preferred not to use their costly and unreliable services. Also previous research (Fanning 2011, 57) has shown that Russian recruitment agencies, which provide services for Russians workers abroad, are not always reliable in terms of their promises regarding pay, accommodation, working hours and safety at work.

Many of the younger pickers had used Russian web-sites as a valuable tool for information regarding the Finnish farms. Gaining knowledge and information regarding the picking industry and access to it improved the pickers' agency and diminished their dependence on one employer. In a similar fashion: According to Rantanen and Valkonen (2011, 18) in forest berry picking information regarding the previous gaining possibilities travels through informal channels to potential pickers in Thailand, and influences the berry pickers' motivation to travel to Finland. We witnessed a similar phenomenon in farm picking as regards some of the pickers' who lived in Russia close to the Finnish border. Many of these pickers' had connections over the Finnish-Russian border, which they utilized when looking for employment in the farms.

In this sense the pickers are embedded in a transnational social field (cf. Helander 2010), which either encourages or discourages potential pickers to travel to Finland. The decision whether to travel or not is embedded in former pickers' experiences regarding the previous season(s). Pickers often rely on information from personal acquaintances about conditions on the farms:

Interviewer: How did you get the idea to come to Finland [for work]?

Picker: My friend works at a NGO [name of NGO withheld] in Finland, and that way I got information that workers are needed in Finland.

A berry farmer we interviewed told regarding the recruitment process that:

In [name of city withheld] there is some Russian woman who works for the council, who intermediates these pickers. I don't know exactly what is behind the arrangement.

As these interview quotes indicate, weak ties play a role for the pickers in gaining access to the farms.

The role of informal and formal networks are intertwined in the process of bringing the employer and employee in contact with each other. The position of the picker is stronger the more knowledge (s)he has as regards ways of entry into the farms. This information is important to the pickers because the farms differ in terms of pay level, working conditions, accommodation, sanitary conditions and the attitude towards the pickers. As our empirical evidence shows, the information the pickers receive (especially those coming to Finland for the first time) is very limited and unreliable. This goes against the classical and neoclassical economists' idea of markets where participants are well informed of options, and where their behaviour is minimally affected by social relations. This idea has been criticized by Granovetter (1985, 481), who stresses that economic action is embedded in the "structure of social relations".

According to our empirical findings the pickers' process of gaining knowledge of how to enter the picking business, and what to expect at the farms, is embedded in a complex set of social relations, which provide information with varying accuracy.

Dependence on the employer

Many informants described how the work induction process at the berry farm had provided them with all the necessary information about conditions and practices. Some expressed gratefulness towards the farmers who took care of many practicalities, such as provision of medicaments, offering shopping tours to nearby towns, helping with access to health care and issues related to accommodation. The farmers described and explained various work-related issues to the pickers. Previous research (e.g. Fanning 2011, 56) has shown that migrants' lack of local language skills increases her/his dependence on the employer. This was the case also in our study: due to lack of common language skills between the farmers and pickers, even drawing pictures was used as a means of informing the worker. As one picker explained "I was shown what to do and if I didn't understand, the farmers painted pictures." The relationship between the farmers and pickers is a *patron-client relationship*. In these dyadic (two-person) exchange relations both have duties towards each other, but the relationship is asymmetrical in terms of power and extends further than mere economical transactions. Patron-client analysis originates from anthropologists, who

found it particularly useful in analyzing arrangements in small local communities where inter-personal power relations were salient (Scott 1972). Scott (1972, 92) defines patron-client relationship as a relationship “in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) [in our case the farmer] uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) [in our case the picker] who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.”

The patron-client relationship was strengthened by the fact that many pickers had received invitations from the farmers for coming to Finland. On the other hand, this bond between the picker and the farmer made the pickers' non-dependent of recruiting agencies.

The information the picker received in aforementioned cases relied heavily on the particular linkage the individual picker had to the farmer. In many cases a large number of pickers work at the same farm, the farmer does not have the possibility of providing each individual picker with the same information. In these cases the relationships among the pickers become crucial in receiving information. “Grapevine” and “jungle drums” become important sources for information.. This kind of informal knowledge, may, or may not, be accurate.

The close dependence between the employer and employee was also evident in cases of health problems:

Interviewer: What do you do if you have health problems?

Picker: I ask someone who is close; a few weeks ago I had pain in my eye. I told this to [name of farmer withheld] and s(he) gave me medicines.

In another interview a picker told that: “We [pickers] don't know [what to do in case of emergency], but we ask the employer according to need.” Without the exception of one case, the pickers had signed work contracts, and hence the relationship between the farmer and picker was for this part formalized. However, the relationship between these actors entailed many informal negotiable aspects and forms of mutual assistance. The asymmetrical power relation between the farmer and picker was strengthened by the fact that in all the farms, we visited, the farmers provided for accommodation. This is supporting the patron-client constellations in addition to transportation, which was in many cases provided by the farmer. Some pickers received accommodation in the same house where a farmer's relative lived. In many cases the farmers took pickers to nearby towns in order for them to do shopping. We do not mean that the pickers' are in a powerless situation in relation to the farmers, as the farmers are dependent on their labour force, which is according to the farmers a scarce resource in their sector. Especially at the peak of the harvesting season, when the demand for labour peaks, it would be costly for the farmers to replace unsatisfied workers who had decided to leave. As information regarding the conditions on farms travel through the

pickers' informal networks, a rational farmer would not, in order to be able to attract future work force, risk his/her reputation by breaching norms and regulations of the business. Nevertheless, some of the pickers had encountered problems during their previous visits to Finland as this interview quote indicates:

Picker: First time I didn't like it, but in the second year I ended up working on a very nice farm, and I liked it. During the third year I started working here and it was even better!

Interviewer: Where did you work during the first year and what were the working conditions?

Picker: I worked in [a municipality in Western Finland, name withdrawn]. Accommodation and attitude towards Russians was bad.

Interviewer: What were you doing there?

Picker: I was doing berry picking.

Interviewer: Is it easier to work, if you already know the place?

Picker: Yes, of course.

With one exception the pickers had written formal work contracts, which they –at least in principle– could use as a resource in a possible situation of dispute. This also strengthened the pickers' position towards the farmer. However, we interviewed one Estonian picker who had not signed a contract, but only agreed verbally on the terms and substance of the work. These kinds of arrangements obviously increase the pickers' dependence on the reliability of the employer. All the pickers we interviewed were legally in the country. This is contrast with the situation in many countries where migrant farm workers are often undocumented migrants. For example in the U.S. approximately half of farm workers do not have a legal authorization to work in the United States (2007-2009 National Agricultural Workers Survey). The legal status of the workers' affects the power relations between the employee and employer so that a documented migrant is in stronger bargaining position vis-à-vis her/his employer.

Peer support

By “support” we refer to predominantly informational phenomena, i.e. support in terms of sharing information about work related conditions and circumstances. Support involves usually many other aspects as well, such as economical support, but in this article we focus information and communication. Migrants rarely speak Finnish before coming to Finland for work. During their temporary stay language skills do not develop in sufficient degree in order to independently arrange formal issues with authorities, which increase the importance of informal networks and weak ties. The pickers' Finnish language skills

were in most cases minimal. Consequently, temporary migrants rely – in addition to the employer – heavily on middle men, informal networks of acquaintances or co-ethnic peer workers. These weak ties are valuable as they include people with sufficient language skills and knowledge about the formal issues, such as visa requirements and financial issues.

The networks include people who are representatives of the employer. The pickers have little competence to check the validity of the information. This further strengthens the client-patron relationship between the farmer and the worker. However, the problems related to false promises and wrong expectations were related mainly to working *first time* in Finland. Gaining information and experience helped the pickers to distinguish between reliable and non-reliable information, and consequently strengthened their agency.

As an interviewed Government official in employment services explained:

The employer sometimes has a Russian speaking employee who can explain the basics of work-related issues. But whether that information is correct, the pickers are not able to check, but at least they know what the employer refers to.

A picker told that:

I went to this place where one gets a social security number. We had people with us who assisted us, but we needed personally to be there. Beside me there was a person who took care of practicalities as I don't speak Finnish.

Interviewer: Who was this person?

Picker: I don't remember, but maybe it was the wife of this previously mentioned [name of farmer withheld]

Interviewer: How do you obtain work-related information?

Picker: I ask [name of co-worker withheld]. He is kind of a boss, an experienced worker, at the farm.

Interviewer: What if you need advice during your free time?

Picker: [name of co-worker withheld] helps also with other problems.

As these interview quotes illustrate it is not always easy for the picker to distinguish the position of the person giving him/her information as the peers, government officials and farmers are all part of the intermingling information and assistance chain that the picker needs. Lack of peer support made the pickers sometimes feel vulnerable:

Interviewer: What did you expect from work in Finland?

Picker: When I came to work in this enterprise abroad I was nervous because no one of my friends had worked at this farm previously, and I had no information.

There were also some cases where the pickers had been dissatisfied with the working conditions and quality of accommodation at the farms they had worked at during previous summers. These cases were not related to the farms we visited, but to the pickers' experiences from previous years in Finland.

Furthermore, in one case the Russian agency who had arranged the trip to Finland had claimed that the farm could offer three months of work. The farmer claimed to be unaware of this promise and in reality there was only work for two weeks. The pickers were left alone to look for a new farm to work at. In this particular case, peer support proved valuable to the pickers as other pickers at the farm knew a Russian woman who was able to find them a new farm to work at. The pickers contacted this person by telephone, but it remained unclear to them who she actually exactly was. However, the contact these newly arrived pickers had with the established pickers was a typical example of a valuable weak tie in a problematic situation. This was particularly important as there was no possibility for the pickers to rely on welfare state social protection or any other institutional support. Weak ties offered a way of mobility for the pickers.

During their spare time many pickers were in contact with relatives and friends in their home country via internet. This was an important social aspect, as the pickers did in most cases not visit their home countries during their stay in Finland. These ties to home countries were examples of *strong ties* in Granovetter's (1973) terms. Despite being important in social and emotional terms these ties could not function as a strategic tool of support in a problematic situation as the weak ties did. This is in accordance with Granovetter's theory (1973), which argues that weak ties provide for more novel information and opportunities than strong ties.

The pickers followed their home country media, but only in some cases Finnish media, due to lack of/weak Finnish language skills. Hence, Finnish media did not provide knowledge or information that would have been valuable to the pickers in terms of their employment or living conditions in Finland.

Organizational support

Employment authorities do not play any significant role in providing information about available jobs in the picking sector. However, the Russian NGO *Ingria* distributes information to Russians regarding work opportunities in Finland. Some pickers had used this information and received farm jobs in Finland. In the agricultural sector the Finnish state authorities provide instructions about seasonal work. The information, which is aimed both for employers and employees, is available on-line. The Wood and Allied Workers' Union has provided the collective agreement for agricultural work on-line in English. However, this is

information provided by the authorities and the trade union is not directed to seasonal workers, and it does not – according to our research material – seem to reach the pickers, as the pickers we interviewed were unaware of this information.

The authorities handle every visa application individually, and they require particular information from the employers regarding accommodation, food supply and health care when issuing visas (Formin.fi instruction, 1-2). This procedure gives some possibilities for advance control regarding the agricultural seasonal workers' working and living conditions at the farms. In forest berry picking a procedure of *posteriority account* is valid, where enterprises submit declarations about the picking season to the embassy after the season has ended (Rantanen & Valkonen 2011, 16). In farm berry picking this procedure is not utilized.

There are NGOs for the Russian population in Finland who assist Russians in finding jobs. These associations transmit information to Russia about the need of labour in Finland. However, in practice temporary workers have to rely on themselves and their informal networks while working in Finland, and NGOs, trade unions, or authorities, do not get involved in their working arrangements or social protection. None of the interviewed pickers had joined a Finnish trade union.

The farmers receive some organizational support, as regards employment of foreign seasonal workers. The information is provided by Fruit- and berry farmers' Association (<http://www.hedelmatmarjat.fi/index.php?section=1> 1.2.2014). The pickers we interviewed were, however, unaware of the different advisory organisations or procedures, and rely almost entirely on the information provided by their employer and other pickers.

In some cases the work contract was written in Russian, which decreased language problems for the pickers, as in these cases the workers did not need any external assistance with paper work. The transnational aspects of the picking employment chain is illustrated by the fact that in some cases the working contracts have been signed in Russia, in some cases in Finland. Some pickers claimed that the Finnish authorities should inform them about work related issues. One picker argued that this would be reasonable as the pickers pay taxes to Finland.

The informality of the pickers' access to the Finnish labour market and the shady arrangements of Russian agencies were in addition to the pickers verified by a Government official we interviewed:

Seasonal workers usually come to Finland outside all formal institutions. The farmers have their own recruiting channels; also Russian agencies operate as intermediaries. I think it is against the Finnish legislation that the Russian agencies demand the seasonal workers pay for getting access to a job. In reality

those agencies do not take any responsibility as what happens to the workers in Finland.

These accounts illustrate that the economy of the picking business is deeply embedded in structures of social relations, as Granovetter's (1985) theory indicates.

Disinformation

Disinformation exists in seasonal work. First of all workers are often given false promises by Russian private recruitment agencies regarding working and living and pay. The difficulty of assessing the future earnings is increased by the fact that the harvest is dependent on the weather. Additionally, in some cases contradictory information exists about whether the pickers are insured or not and what the insurances really cover. Pickers themselves assume occasionally that farmers are obliged to have insurances for pickers, and farmers in their turn assume that pickers have insurances. This does not have to be deliberate disinformation, but rather an opportunistic stance leading to selective information. According to the Finnish law pickers are required to have an insurance (travelers or accidents) in order to get a visa for seasonal work (Formin.fi 2013, 1). This does, however, not free the employer from having the compulsory worker's compensation insurance.

A judicially complicated situation arises, if the picker is not covered by an insurance for the particular job that s(he) is performing. This question is of importance as in some cases the pickers assisted with also other than picking, such as packing, gardening and forestry. This mutual unawareness about insurances increases the vulnerability of the worker, despite picking not being a particularly dangerous job. The pickers also expressed doubt about what their compulsory insurance covers in case of accident.

The information the pickers obtain is sometimes anecdotal, often not valid, and spread by informal networks. Nevertheless, the informal networks often provide accurate information as previous chapters have shown. Pickers travelling first time to Finnish farms cannot always be certain where exactly they are going, how much they are going to earn, what kind of conditions exist and how long they are going to stay. Furthermore, the pickers' were in many cases not aware whether they gain right to pensions from the taxes they pay in Finland.

A government employment official told us that "They [the pickers] do not know collective agreements. They understand the logic of payment but it has happened that their income is smaller than they have been promised in Russian employment agencies. I once wondered whether the employer [the farmer] is at all aware of how much the pickers have been promised by a Russian agency."

A similar view was given by a Russian picker who had for the first time come to work in Finland several years ago to a farm:

When I came to Finland [for the first time] I did not know there were collective agreements. For us the most important was to get a job and a salary.

Nevertheless, the more experienced pickers who had been more than once in Finland, were more able than the first timers in avoiding the pitfalls associated with seasonal work in the farms. Despite the challenges, many of the interviewees were, however, content with the working conditions and earnings when we interviewed them. The problems were associated to earlier experiences. Many pickers had returned to work in Finland several times. Informal social security

Due to lack of reliable information, dependence on close networks and absence of supporting organizations, seasonal workers themselves are (as a social category) required to find out about work related circumstances. They need a certain kind of “street-wisness” and predictive ability in order to cope with the highly variable conditions they face. This would not be a substantial problem in ordinary circumstances, where home is relatively close to the location of the seasonal work, but this is not the case for many of the foreign pickers. Some of the pickers we interviewed originated from destinations in Russia that were several thousand kilometers from the farms. Due to language problems and specific restrictions in relation to stay in Finland their situation is characterized by vulnerability. The berry picking visas do for instance not entitle the pickers to work in any other occupation, which reduces their choice of employers. Neither do berry pickers become residents in any Finnish municipalities, which mean that they are not covered by the residence based social insurance. The Finnish welfare state does not reach these denizens with its safety network.

Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to claim the pickers would be without agency as individuals. In fact they are in high degree embedded in networks of different actors, among whom their peers and employers are the most important supportive parties, who they use as a strategic resource. Thus, the pickers’ situation in terms of benefiting from the welfare state does not resemble the situation of residents in western welfare states, as social security (understood in a broad sense) is in the pickers’ case provided by informal social networks.

Interviewer: What would you tell about your experiences to someone in Russia, who contemplates coming here [for work]?

Picker: That one has to rely on your own force. Use common sense.

Interviewer: How?

Picker: One has to think for one self. I don't have much experience.

The question of what to do in situations of health problems was unclear to most of the pickers. Most of them said they would contact their employer for assistance (cf. Helander 2014). The coverage of the compulsory health insurances the pickers' need in order to obtain a visa remained unclear for most of the pickers. There were some rumours among the pickers that the insurance had not covered the costs.

Conclusion

Finland provides in a global context an example of a highly coordinated and universalist welfare state. In the best case scenario utilization of foreign seasonal workers offers a win-win-situation where both the farmer and the picker gain, and the state receive tax revenues. Labour shortages in farm work can be solved through temporary migration. However, the farm picking business cannot be fully understood from the perspective of neo-classical economic theory, which assumes an idealized market where well-informed participants make decisions of selling and buying labour. The economy of the picking business is embedded, to use Granovetter's term, in social connections and informal networks. Weak ties and informal networks provide for more valuable information for the pickers than information provided by the state authorities. The picking business is transnational in its nature and the chains of farmers, middle-men, and pickers interact to a large extent outside the welfare state institutions. The pickers' connection with Finnish authorities and the social security system is weak or non-existent. Coming to work is a strategic choice for the pickers based on the fact that working in Finland can provide substantial gains from the perspective of the pickers who come from low-wage countries (in our study mainly Russia, but also Estonia and Ukraine). In addition to the economic motives, some pickers emphasized the social aspects and new experiences of working in a foreign country. Many of the pickers return to Finland year after year for picking. This seemed to be the case especially for those originating from the Russian side of the Karelia province, which borders to Finland.

Especially when coming first time to work in Finland there exists among the pickers' uncertainty regarding all dimensions of the process. There exists disinformation regarding the different aspects related to working in Finland. This view was evident in the interviews with pickers and government officials. According to the pickers the conditions at the farms vary from poor to perfect. The foreign workers social security is externalized from the welfare state to the individual worker; the risks are borne by the individual worker. In the question of access to health care there existed a lack of knowledge among the pickers and many seemed to rely on good luck in not getting ill or having accidents. Nevertheless, the Estonians who as EU-citizens have access to public health care form an exception in this case. Another

problem for some of the pickers had been the Russian agencies that work as intermediaries, but seem to be unreliable and costly. Gaining knowledge and being able to use weak ties ameliorated the pickers' situation and social security.

The pickers' we interviewed seemed fairly content with working conditions and accommodation offered at the farms they were working at when interviewed. Nevertheless, some had negative experiences as regard working conditions and accommodation on the farms they had worked at previous summers.

The use of foreign pickers seems to help keeping the berry and farm vegetable picking business competitive as it provides the business with work force in a situation where the native population is not attracted to these, physically heavy, monotonous and low-paid jobs. It also gives opportunities to the pickers to enhance their living standards. The logic of relying on foreign low-paid workers who gain little from the Finnish welfare state despite paying taxes can also be seen as a global competition strategy of the welfare state.

-några plockare hade tagit mediciner med från hemlandet (strategi)

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