
*Work, Well-Being and Careers
of Central and East European Migrant Workers in
the Dutch Food Production Chain
During (And After) Covid-19*

Key Project Findings

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Contents

Introduction	3
Underlying factors explaining the quality of working conditions of CEE migrant workers.	4
Subproject 1A ‘Systematic review’	4
Subproject 1B ‘Expert research’	6
CEE migrant workers’ experience of their quality of working conditions.....	8
Subproject 2 ‘Migrant workers’ views on Covid’	8
Subproject 3 ‘Identity work in warehouse’	9
Arriving at actions for persistent improvements	11
Subproject 4 ‘Group Model Building’	11
Key take aways for research and practice	13

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 revealed the poor living and working conditions of many Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrant workers in low waged sectors in the Netherlands to a wider audience. A shared concern arose about the dependent position of many workers upon their employers for housing, transportation and health. Next to an adequate response from the government to improve the protection of this vulnerable group of workers (‘Commissie Roemer’ – Aanjaagteam arbeidsmigranten), the pandemic inspired this research on the mechanisms that explain the persistence of precarious work for as well as the potential for decent work and careers of CEE migrant workers.

Central and Eastern workers are a specific group of migrants. Enacting their right of free movement within the European Union to work in another member state, they face fewer obstacles than non-EU workers to accept work in the Netherlands. At the same time, their EU citizenship status makes the group relatively invisible to authorities. In the past decades, CEE migrants have become the dominant group of production workers in sectors such as construction, agriculture and warehousing.

Our research was inspired by the observation that while stakeholders all agreed that improving working conditions was necessary, they did not agree on the ‘how’. In fact, we experienced a continuous blame-shifting over who is accountable for the working conditions of CEE migrant workers, coupled with an uncertainty about effective measures to improve their conditions. The research focused on two ‘vital sectors’ in the food production chain that were excluded from lockdowns in the Netherlands: the glasshouse horticulture and the warehousing sectors.

The aim of our project was to uncover the **mechanisms** explaining the quality of working conditions for Central and Eastern European migrant workers in the low-wage sectors of the food production chain in the Netherlands, how do **workers experience** these conditions, and what starting points do these offer for **measures** by institutions, organizations and migrant workers to contribute to improving quality of work.

We posed three sub questions that together contribute to the project aim:

1. What are the underlying factors that explain the quality of working conditions for CEE migrant workers?
2. How do CEE migrant workers experience their quality of working conditions?
3. What can institutions, organizations, and CEE migrant workers do to enhance the quality of working conditions?

In total five projects provided the data for answering these sub questions. This document summarizes the key findings, publications and practical implications of each project, and concludes with some overall lessons learned and suggestions for future projects.

The full versions of the papers mentioned in this document will be part of the doctoral dissertation of Kornelía Anna Kerti, which is planned for public defense on April 4, 2025.

If you are interested in receiving the manuscript and/or attending the defense in person or online, or if you have any other questions, please contact b.kroon@tilburguniversity.edu.

Underlying factors explaining the quality of working conditions of CEE migrant workers.

Subproject 1A ‘Systematic review’

The first subproject is a systematic review of the existing literature on the causes and consequences of precarious working conditions of Central and Eastern European workers in Western Europe. In total 119 research papers were found that focused on the quality of work and life of our population (CEE citizens) working in North-Western Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, the UK and Scandinavia).

What is currently known?

- In migration research, disciplines often develop their studies and viewpoints in isolation, making comprehensive interdisciplinary research uncommon. Consequently, research often focuses on some aspects and a limited number of levels, thereby shedding light on just a part of the total system.
- Existing research outlines several frameworks explaining why marginalized workers often face precarious work conditions. These include *labor market segmentation theories* and more recent models like the *psychology of working theory* and the *work precarity model*. While these frameworks detail the causes and effects of poor working conditions, they fall short in explaining why such conditions persist over time.

What does the subproject add to this?

- To account for complexity and interconnectedness of causes and consequences that sustain ‘how things work’ in the context of CEE migrants’ working conditions, we turned to systems dynamics theory. System dynamics help in identifying how different components of a system interact and reinforce each other. By deriving causes and consequences from the existing

research, we developed a non-linear **causal loop diagram** highlighting the feedback mechanisms affecting CEE migrant workers' working conditions in Western European food production.

- The findings show how factors at the worker, organizational, and institutional levels are interconnected, balancing or reinforcing each other through feedback loops, explaining why precarious working conditions persist over time. Three high level causal loops explaining the quality of working conditions of CEE workers in North-Western Europe:
- **FIRST.** The **quality of labor regulation and social protection** safeguards migrant workers' rights and interests. Three causes improve the quality of labor regulation and protection:
 - **Collective action of migrants** increases the quality of labor regulation and social protection but is conditional on the *non-segmentation of workplace relations* and the *language skills of migrants*.
 - **Level of job-to-job transitions** – the frequency with which migrant workers move to another job – often high in temporary agency work. Less moving means greater independence to engage in collective action, as well as greater satisfaction with their jobs.
 - **Agency of migrants** - the ability to undertake actions to improve working conditions – improves with better quality work. This shows in more engagement in collective action, and more initiative to self-development out of precarity (language, career).
- **SECOND.** The use of **temporary work agencies (TWA)** indirectly affects the quality of working conditions:
 - **Perceived good work ethic** means that employers (user firms) prefer CEE workers because of their assumed superior work ethic, however, this increases the performance expectations to which CEE migrants should adhere, at the expense of their health (a fundamental working condition).
 - **Temporariness of work** – on average, temporary work assignments reduce the time CEE migrants spend in the host country. If they would stay longer, the better they would understand host country working conditions, making them less willing to accept precarious work. Temporariness also negatively affects language skills, hence hindering collective action.
- **THIRD.** Migrants' **availability for precarious work** addresses migrants' preparedness to accept low quality working conditions:
 - **Mobility barriers.** On a macro level, cost competitiveness drives flexibilization policies that increase migrant's dependency on their employer through multiples dependencies and short assignments that for barriers for migrant's self-initiated mobility. On the micro level, dependency for housing and transportation limits CEE migrants to use their mobility and search for another job. However, increased mobility also reduces the length of stay and hence the likelihood of collective action. If the quality of work is good (e.g., a standard contract), mobility between jobs reduces and migrants' involvement in collective action for better work increases. Mobility barriers make CEE migrants vulnerable for precarious work.
 - **Power distance** between employers and migrants. Migrants have little choice for good quality jobs if they are dependent upon their employers. Under the condition of stable work, migrants can develop a personal life and 'onboard' in the host country, which will help them understand 'normal' labor standards and reduce their availability for precarious work. Being able to learn and speak the local language further narrows the power distance between employers and migrants.

Implications for practitioners

- Employers and trade unions need to **improve HRM practices** for migrant workers, especially focusing on language skills and knowledge of labor rights, employee involvement and protection of health and safety at the workplace.
- **Separating employment contracts from tenancy agreements** would enhance migrant workers' agency and increase their labor market mobility.
- **Policy** makers on local and national level must ensure that migrant workers have both good working conditions and adequate housing. Approving the creation of industrial sites that depend on migrant labor should always be accompanied by robust social and housing policies.

Publications / output

- Article titled '*European Migrant Workers' Quality of Working Conditions in the Food Production Sector: A Causal Loop Diagram*' is in second round of revision at an international journal.

Subproject 1B 'Expert research'

This subproject delved deep in understanding the Dutch context of CEE migrants before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. We interviewed 34 experts ranging from user firms and employer's associations, temporary work agencies and their associations, trade unions representing CEE migrant workers, policy makers, NGO's and researchers, who all were stakeholders in the question about the quality of work and life of CEE migrant workers in glasshouse horticulture.

What is currently known?

- Migrants find it difficult to improve their work, living situation and careers by themselves. Without action, it is easiest to work and live in an 'accepted' stereotypical space where many migrant workers are. In the Netherlands, CEE workers are associated with low wage, seasonal, and flexible work, with implicit expectations about temporality motives, a wage gap, and a highly productivity, as well as poor living conditions. Such expectations create social borders – if CEE migrants behave non-stereotypically (e.g., objecting to working so hard), they may face negative consequences (e.g., losing their job).
- Who 'creates' this space? Existing research mainly considers traditional factors like regulations and organizational policies, overlooking the growing influence of stakeholders such as NGO's, media representatives and researchers. However, also indirect actors contribute to how a problem is framed, what ideas exist about its causes, and what ideas exist about what can be done. Together, they build a space that frames the mobility agency of migrants.
- We asked the question which factors stakeholders mention configure the stereotypical space, and how the actions suggested to improve the perceived status quo would improve or worsen the position of CEE migrants to 'move out' of the stereotypical space.

What the subproject adds to this?

- We found eight distinct groups of stakeholders (Temporary work agency, User firm, Trade union, Policy maker, NGO, Researcher, Housing, Media) and interviewed at least two representatives of each group.

- We analyzed common patterns that marked 1) perceptions that confirm and control the status quo; 2) mentions of actions aimed at ‘doing things differently’; 3) actions aimed at creating collaborations across partners from different social spheres; and 4) actions aimed at making links with other spaces that result in a new definition of the space.
- Three overarching boundaries patterns in the interviews defined the space within which migrant workers’ mobility is embedded:
- (A) boundary of **hyper flexibility**. Flexibility in all domains of life, including job, housing, income, and social relationships reduces the chances that migrants can improve their situation. Neoliberal policies are generally blamed for maintaining the status quo of ‘flexibilization’. Perceived potential for ‘doing things differently’ lies in certification, reducing peaks in production, certification of temporary work agencies, and robotization. Some employers start their own agency or collaborate with migrant representatives to reduce the flexibility that is imposed on migrants. Hiring beyond the EU negatively affects the status quo, as non-EU workers can replace CEE migrants and nothing improves, only the nationalities of workers occupying the space change.
- (2) boundary of **multiple dependencies** reliance on the temporary work agency for services beyond employment, such as transportation from the country of origin to the host country, housing, daily transportation to work and easing access to healthcare. This space is maintained because of cross -border recruitment channels, creating a dependency from the first contact. It was often mentioned that this practice is vulnerable to malpractice / criminals. A lack of housing in the proximity of work can create dependencies for transportation to work. Mentions of change lie e.g., in initiatives to guarantee independent and good quality housing. Especially independent, secure housing improves the independence of migrants to make their own choices. Examples of collaborations between stakeholders that work exist between TWA housing planning and municipalities, and the establishment of quality housing certification systems.
- (3) boundary of **voice** makes that migrants have limited opportunities to articulate their concerns about working and living conditions. Causes mentioned for this are low trade union membership under migrants, the limited capacity of labor inspectorate to control adherence to regulations, the present channels for complaints are too difficult for migrants to navigate themselves to voice concerns, and a low awareness among migrants about their rights. Hopes for improvement are expected from the European Labor Authority (inspections and information provision), from employers and TWA educating and informing their migrant employees, from communication in social media groups of migrant communities, and from direct help by specializes NGO’s. Collaborations were mentioned between NGO’s, trade unions and government, especially in the domain of precarious housing conditions. Finally, employers investing in inclusive management of migrants and local employees help to break boundaries that keep migrants a separate group in and outside the workplace.

Implications for practitioners

- Stakeholders identify how e.g., flexibility policies and transnational hiring around low-wage jobs for migrants can create a space for CEE migrants that is characterized by hyper flexibility, multiple dependences, and lack of voice.
- Stakeholders actively challenge this stereotypical space by a **variety of actions that can improve the position of migrants to improve their own situation**: policies and human resource management aimed at reducing flexibility and reducing multiple dependencies and promoting channels for information and communication.

- For the worst cases, a **support network** (NGO's, trade unions) can aid migrants to access their legal rights.
- Actions aimed at finding new, non-EU groups of workers are generally believed to worsen the status quo.

Publications / output

- Article titled '*Multi-stakeholder boundary work contesting the space of hyper flexibility, multiple dependencies, and voice: Migrant workers' mobility agency in the Netherlands*' is under review with an international journal.

CEE migrant workers' experience of their quality of working conditions

This section highlights the need to understand the working conditions of Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrant workers from their own perspective across time and beyond 'the usual suspects'. Many studies focus on Polish labor migrants in low skilled work, and there is a gap in research on other CEE groups, like Hungarians. Some industries employ large numbers of migrants, but are hardly studied, especially the warehousing sector.

By focusing on a particular group of CEE migrant workers from a shared cultural identity with the lead researcher, and focusing on an under-researched employment sector, we add valuable insights to the existing literature on CEE migrant workers' experiences with their working conditions. We went beyond snap-shot interviews, using life-history interviews, longitudinal interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork.

Subproject 2 'Migrant workers' views on Covid'

In 2019, before Covid 19, we were driven by an interest in the working conditions of CEE migrant workers in the distribution warehouses popping up everywhere. Thanks to Kornelía Kerti's Central European background, we managed to speak to a diverse group of Hungarian migrants working in warehouse distribution jobs across the Netherlands. All were interviewed for 1,5-2 hours about their career, their migration trajectory and their experiences with work in the Netherlands. Findings from the first round of interviews generally confirmed the precarious working and living conditions widely reported in other research. The investigation might had stopped then, but then the Covid pandemic happened. All the sudden, our interviewees were in the middle of a media storm about being trapped in precarious work and living conditions, and about the health risks they presumably created for others and themselves. We re-approached the same group we interviewed before the pandemic, and inquired how they experienced the consequences of the lockdowns for their work, life and careers.

What is currently known?

- Employability is the ability to find and keep a job. During a working life, people navigate their careers by using the personal (e.g., diploma's, experience, language skills), network (e.g., cultural group, professional network) and material (e.g., income, a car) resources they have. CEE migrant workers in flexible, dependent employment relations often lack the right resources to work on their employability and navigate their careers.

- According to career-shock theory, dramatic events can lead to a shift in one's career. Career shocks can be perceived positive or negative – a change for a fresh start, or the start of things turning worse. Having resources may help to see a career shock as something positive.
- Covid -19 has been identified as a career shock, but did CEE migrants really experience it like that? How did it affect their careers?

What the subproject adds to this?

- We found three main patterns:
- When the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic co-occurred with migrants' **resource gain spirals**, migrants had positive beliefs of their employability. E.g., having recently gained a place of their own, and time to update skills (course), and applying for another job.
- When the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic co-occurred with migrants' **resource loss spirals**, migrants had negative beliefs of their employability. E.g., breaking up with a long-term partner, being made redundant just before.
- When the Covid-19 crisis did not co-occur with migrants' resource gain and loss spirals, migrants experienced **resource stress**. E.g., being moved by the temporary work agency and losing the sole workmate who speaks the same language is a tremendous stressor during the pandemic lockdowns.

Implications for researchers and practitioners

- **Enhance context sensitivity in careers research.** Focus on understanding the specific challenges faced by individuals in different sectors, especially those beyond their control. Tailor research to address the unique needs of low-wage and precarious employment sectors.
- **Improve resource accessibility.** Identify and provide essential resources that migrant workers need to cope with global crises. Ensure these resources are easily accessible and available to those in need.
- **Foster collaboration.** Encourage policy makers, temporary work agencies, client organizations, and migrants to work together. Develop joint initiatives aimed at improving resource access and creating supportive environments.
- **Create supportive environments.** Implement HR policies and practices that promote stability and security for migrant workers. Focus on creating conditions that allow migrants to maintain wellbeing during adverse circumstances. This is requiring collective effort between all stakeholders.

Publications / output

- Article titled '*Precarious Employment Amidst Global Crises: Career Shocks, Resources and Migrants' Employability*' is published in Career Development International.

Subproject 3 'Identity work in warehouse'

From earlier subprojects, it became clear that many people hold opinions about the experiences of migrants in warehouse distribution without having firsthand knowledge. Auto-ethnography, a research method where individuals examine their own experiences within a cultural context, was employed during a six-week period at a Warehouse. Daily notes were taken after each workday to document these experiences. While some observations are specific to migrants, others apply to the entire workforce, highlighting the relevance to migrants as integral members of the workforce in a company. The opportunity to work in a warehouse for six weeks offered valuable insights.

What is currently known?

- Talking about or really feeling the bodily experience and emotions for yourself are different things. Interviews can capture descriptions of events and emotions, but do not really capture understanding the impact of working as a migrant in a warehouse along other nationalities and locals, doing heavy physical work.

What the subproject adds to this?

- We noted five insights that provide lessons for all who talk about ‘migrant work’:
- (1) Do not underestimate the **impact of doing physical, repetitive work**. Lifting and carrying for 8 hours a day demands a toll from the body. To keep up with the heavy work, the researcher reported disturbed sleeping patterns and feeling exhausted, picking up unhealthy habits like smoking and eating fat food. Days are long and dreadful, and work feels meaningless. Goods transported on day 1 are returned two days later for no obvious reason. The concept of a ‘client who sees your work’ feels very abstract.
- (2) **Language**. In the company, basic English was a prerequisite to become a permanent employee, and speaking Dutch is a prerequisite for career advancement. We found that language creates a divide between workers, putting non-speakers in the most precarious jobs (later), and an uneasy awareness on behalf of management about the need for language training. Studying a language requires energy. Doing heavy work and do language studying next to it appeared unrealistic for the researcher (who was taking Dutch classes in the same period).
- (3) **Health & safety**. In the reflections, we often discussed how the researcher noticed that many employees have physical complaints. Despite instructions, employees seem to engage in unhealthy and unsafe behaviors. Specific observations concern unsafe behavior in lifting products, unsafe behavior in working with chemicals, and self-experiencing an accident. Pushing the speed of work to finish in time is a key cause of the behavior, as well as underestimating longer-term health consequences.
- (4) **Performance management**. We noticed that a high pressure on direct supervisors to make sure employees perform well. Performance standards were unclear and a notable source for conflict between ‘cliques’.
- (5) **Work climate**. There were cliques. Despite good intentions (e.g., a monthly lunch), migrants feel unattended to (croquettes for Muslim colleagues). Also, among each other, employees often make culturally insensitive comments about each other. The researcher self-experienced minor as well as more serious conflicts at the workplace.

Implications for practitioners

- Many of the experiences could be countered by tailored **HR policy and practices**.
- Warehouse work comprises a masculine, physically healthy and strong, Dutch-speaking, independent and customer-focused ideal worker expectation. This negatively affects the health and wellbeing of (migrant) workers. **Lifting aids, instructions, and supportive leadership** could counter this implicit expectation.
- Language differences obstruct a collaborative team climate and increase individual precarity. Employers often report about organizing **language courses** (good intentions) but find that migrants ‘do not participate’ (blame, put it on the willingness rather than the circumstances) and then do not continue investing in such trainings. Language training during work hours, a language buddy, and bilingual work instructions that all nationalities in the workplace can understand would demonstrate a serious investment.

- While there are instructions and protective equipment, in particular employee behavior causes health and safety risks. **Discuss risky behavior, reward safe behavior, give the right example (supervisors).** High work standards, and the risk of creating overtime by working safely (that is, more slowly) encourage unsafe and unhealthy behaviors. Investigate how overtime can be avoided without raising productivity norms.
- Work climate seems hindered by ‘laissez faire’ and performance control, rather than **inclusive management.** Understanding cultural differences, and even more individual needs and making an effort of unite all workers. Train direct supervisors and production management to become inclusive leaders.

Publications / output

- Article titled ‘Navigating embodied identities in warehouse distribution: A critical autoethnography of a migrant researcher’s shifting sense of self’ will be submitted to an international journal before October 1st.

Arriving at actions for persistent improvements

The second subproject collected the voices of CEE migrant before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The third subproject added to the CEE worker perspective even deeper, by the PhD candidate experiencing six weeks of warehouse work herself. The fourth and final subproject concerned action research, where we brought together representatives of various stakeholder groups to see how some mechanisms that contribute to the persistence of precarious conditions could be overcome.

Subproject 4 ‘Group Model Building’

Much of CEE migrants’ employment is facilitated through one of the close to 24 thousand registered temporary work agencies in the Netherlands (Inspectie SZW, 2020). Their position in offering employment, but often also arrange migrant workers’ housing, and transportation to work was central in each of the other subprojects. From the systematic literature review, the stakeholder interviews and the interviews with CEE migrants, tensions around temporary agency work arose. In this final project, we brought together stakeholders from the same groups we interviewed previously: temporary work agencies, user firms, migrant workers, trade union, policy makers and NGO’s, to jointly examine the mechanisms influencing the quality of temporary agency work, with the aim to understand where improvements are most impactful.

The sub project involved three 4-hour sessions with 14 participants (temporary agencies, user firms, policy makers, migrant workers). together they explored which mechanisms explain the quality of temporary agency work in the Dutch greenhouse and warehouse distribution sectors, and together prioritized the actions that would have the largest impact.

What is currently known?

- Temporary work agencies contribute to workforce flexibilization needs of organizations. Migrants form a substantive part of the low-waged temporary agency workforce who are vulnerable to precarious living and working conditions. The Covid-19 crisis made HRM tensions in temporary agency migrant work salient.

- Precarious work in temporary agency migrant work is sustained by HRM tensions deriving from fundamental contradictions between stakeholders in temporary agency work.

What the subproject adds to this?

- We examined how stakeholders involved in temporary agency migrant work in the Netherlands respond to HRM tensions in the triangular employment relationship.
- We found three tensions central to the tripartite relationship between worker, user firm, and temporary work agency: the flexible workforce tension (between temporary work agency and user firm), the expectation alignment tension (between user firm and migrant) and the package deal tension (between migrant and temporary work agency).
- Tensions lead to paradoxes: conflicting interests between stakeholders that are apparently very difficult to overcome. These are noticeable from how stakeholders talk about each other's position.
- We find that participatory approaches to engage stakeholders can lead to more accommodating, but also to more polarizing responses to tensions, dependent on the intensity of the contradictions between stakeholders. Proactive responses create possibilities for virtuous cycles of tensions, ultimately reducing precarious work in temporary agency migrant work.

Implications for practitioners

- Between the participants to the action research, a shared set of recommendations was prioritized:
 - **Enforcement of labor regulation.** Not new regulations, yes more control on adherence to regulations, increase the chance that the 'bad guys' are found and punished.
 - **Chain responsibility.** Create awareness with end users (customers) about the labor production chain.
 - **Municipal responsibility for housing.** No new economic activities in a municipality when there is no social infrastructure for employees (where do workers live?).
 - **Information provision.** Information about working conditions for migrants before coming to the Netherlands.

Publications / output

Report based on Focus Group Model Building sessions.

Article titled '*From 'blame game' to virtuous cycles: Exploring stakeholder responses to HRM tensions in temporary agency migrant work through action research*' under review with an international journal.

Key take aways for research and practice

Three lessons follow from this project that are important for future research and for practice.

- 1. Multiple disciplines, multiple actors, multiple levels.** Because there are so many mechanisms determining the quality of quality of work, lives and careers of CEE migrants, there are no easy solutions. However, by taking a multidisciplinary view, and engaging actors that are directly (migrants, employers, temporary work agencies) and indirectly (experts, policy makers, housing) affecting the quality of work and lives, on all levels (individual, municipal, regional, national and cross-national), may change the dynamics in the system.
- 2. Perspective taking.** All too often we perceive an issue like migration from our own fragmented understanding. Without critically assessing our perspectives, we may overlook e.g., the diversity of the CEE migrant population, or assuming that a certain actor is the “bad guy” or assume that offering language trainings will make CEE migrants proficient in speaking Dutch and blaming migrants for not taking this opportunity.
- 3. Action research methods** can contribute to building bridges between actors who experience tensions because of opposing interests.