
ECVC Youth: Navigating Dreams & Precarity

Working and Learning Conditions of Young Agricultural Workers, Interns and Volunteers Across Europe

A report by Priscilla Claeys and Barbara Van Dyck

Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, CAWR, Coventry University, UK

Published by the Youth Articulation
of the European Coordination of Via Campesina (ECVC)

July 2022

Key Messages

- Peasant farmers and young agricultural workers are two sides of the same coin. The failure to provide a decent income for farmers jeopardizes the training of future peasant farmers. Improving learning and working conditions for youth in agriculture is key for farm generational renewal across Europe.
- Young agricultural workers are learning organic and agroecological farming in very harsh conditions, including no or reduced pay, and inadequate housing, food and support. This limits the possibilities for socially and ecologically just food system transformations. As affirmed by the UN Declaration

on the Rights of Peasants and other people working in rural areas (UNDROP), young agricultural workers are entitled to safe and healthy working conditions, work opportunities and an adequate standard of living.

- Many young agricultural workers who are new to farming are against free labour but do unpaid work out of solidarity with farmers who are struggling, financially and emotionally. In return, they hope to learn the skills and contribute to a different agricultural future. This generates questions about the sustainability and politics of the *solidarity labour* that is provided by young workers. How can it be made visible and acknowledged? How to imagine better financial or in-kind compensations, improved

learning conditions and formal recognition of work experience? How to address inequalities around class, gender and race so as to create equal opportunities for all youth interested in farming?

- Young people work in order to learn, and learn as they are working, even if no formal training is provided. Working and learning cannot be separated. The crafting of adequate learning spaces should be better supported across all working arrangements, including volunteering and paid work. This cannot be achieved without ample support for the farms and farm networks that are hosting and training young workers.

Acknowledgements

We thank all the young agricultural workers who generously agreed to share their beautiful as well as their more difficult experiences. We are also grateful to the ECVC Youth Articulation for its tireless movement building work and to Hattie Hammans who supported us with background research. The views expressed in the report, as well as any inaccuracies and mistakes, are the authors' sole responsibility.

Objectives, methodology and focus of the study

This report assesses the working and learning conditions of *young agricultural workers* defined as people who labour in the fields, mountains

and farms and livestock or food processing units and who are less than 40 years old. It looks at a wide range of issues including working hours, pay, contracts, negotiation power, food and housing, and gender-based and intersectional discrimination. Issues such as finding a farm that is best suited for learning, difficulties and dreams for the future are also assessed.

The study covers the lived experiences of a diversity of youth who are part of, or close to, the ECVC Youth Articulation.¹ At the request of ECVC Youth, we carried out in-depth interviews with 21 young agricultural workers between February and June 2022.² ECVC Youth was in charge of identifying and contacting research participants with a view to ensure regional and gender diversity, while covering a range of experiences (type of farm, type of background, working arrangement, care responsibilities, ...). The study does not pretend to represent young agricultural workers in Europe in general. Research questions were co-constructed with ECVC Youth and preliminary findings were shared and debated with research participants in June 2022.

At the moment of writing, participants work in 12 different countries, i.e. Turkey, Switzerland, Germany, Romania, Hungary, France, Italy, UK, Spain, Belgium, Austria and the Netherlands. Many studied and worked in 2 or 3 different countries and almost all are white European. The study explores the perspectives of female (7), non-binary (2) and male youth (12), using an intersectional lens. Only 2 participants had children, and 1 had a partner with children. Most participants are from middle-class

¹ Out of 21 research participants, 16 are linked to ECVC youth, and 5 additional participants were drawn from the networks of participants (Hungary, France) and the researchers (Belgium) to ensure broader diversity.

² Interviews were conducted by Priscilla Claeys and Barbara Van Dyck via zoom in French, Dutch, English and Spanish as well as in Turkish with the support of ECVC interpreters. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were transcribed. The participants have been anonymised and are referred to as 'PP' followed by a number when quoted.



and urban background, and many have academic degrees. Some have second or third generation ties to the land, while two grew up on family farms (Turkey) and are currently transitioning from conventional to organic farming. This study does not do justice to their experiences as it primarily focuses on young people who are new to agriculture.

Participants are engaged in a diversity of agricultural activities, including: shepherding; vegetable growing; work with fruit, herbs, hemp and flowers or plant nurseries; small dairy/livestock farms; agroforestry; and wine cellars. Most work on mixed farms and/or in Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) but many youth also have experiences on large/conventional farms (vineyards, olives, almonds, fruit picking), sometimes as migrant or seasonal workers. This study does not discuss the experiences of young people doing mostly seasonal/migrant agricultural work.

Participants' working arrangements reflect the flexibilization of the agricultural labour "market": volunteering through international networks such as WWOOFing or Workaway; apprenticeships and internships linked to formal training; casual and seasonal work; waged (part time/full-time, permanent or temporary) work; freelance or self-employed workers linked to CSAs or cooperatives; and newly settled peasants. Some youth are vaguely considering to become new entrant farmers or shepherds, while others are deliberately accumulating experience to gradually move closer to their dream, be it working on the land as waged workers, herding animals, or setting up their own farm. The study does not focus on the experiences of new entrants who are long established and in a managing position.

After a brief exploration of the backgrounds and motivations of the background and motivations of young agricultural workers, we look at their

lived experiences with a focus on working and learning conditions, so as to highlight some key tensions. With this report, we hope to contribute to the recognition of young agricultural workers' conditions, and support the political work of ECVV Youth.

Motivations and backgrounds of young agricultural workers

“...I have a high living standard, because I can eat organic vegetables that I grow myself. I live in a very beautiful place, and I have freedom and whatever [...]. It's not always easy to, you know, make a price of it, but it's basically priceless.”
(PP23)

Young agricultural workers want to contribute to a different agricultural future, through a commitment to organic, agroecological and/or biodynamic farming. They embody what ECVV Youth stated in a 2021 position paper: “We do not aim at making European agriculture competitive and profitable but to ensure food provision through food systems that are socially and ecologically just.”³ Some are engaged in food and climate justice movements. Some experiment with vegan or non-mechanised farming methods to advance a post-industrial or degrowth society.

They want an alternative to an “office job” (PP12) or to the “noise of the factory and the industrial smells” (PP10). They prioritize their mental health, and highlight the importance of being outside, “feeling the seasons” (PP5), “living with the animals... [and] ... being attuned to the weather” (PP21), doing

something with their hands. They enjoy doing varied tasks, and the fact that “work is part of life” (PP5). Becoming a peasant is a natural way of embodying social and environmental change, of having a “positive impact on the territory” (PP5) and of aligning one's values and actions: “I realised that [...] the best way for me to have agency, where I would feel the most like an actor, is to be a farmer” (PP20). The decision to work the land is thus seen both as a recipe against alienation and an activist's choice. For some with an agricultural background, however, farming is not a choice: “I didn't choose to work the land, I was forced into it. (...) We just survive. We're on a subsistence salary. That's why I've always hated being a peasant” (PP9).

Some have family ties with farming, through grandparents or uncles and aunts, who passed on some knowledge. Most participants grew up in middle class families and in cities. They enter farming later in life (compared to youth from agricultural background), after having completed at least some years of university training and gained some work experience in different sectors. Many have bachelors or master degrees linked to sustainable agriculture, agronomy, life sciences or environmental protection, and several have lived abroad. These experiences give them a wide range of skills as well as access to networks that come in handy to harvest grants, support schemes and funding opportunities. This puts them in a privileged position to navigate the daunting administrative aspects linked to running a farm. Some of them combine agricultural work with consultancy, teaching, research or part-time computer-based jobs. Often out of necessity, other times “to nourish different parts” of oneself (PP25).

³ ECVV Youth Articulation (2021). Position document on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform. ECVV Youth Articulation, July 2021. <https://www.eurovia.org/publication-of-the-youth-articulations-position-document-on-the-reform-of-the-common-agricultural-policy/>

Different forms of youth labour in agriculture

Small organic farms are typically labour-intensive while disposing of low revenues and personal incomes.⁴ To make the farms work, “off-farm incomes and self-exploitation” are common, but insufficient coping strategies.⁵ The use of volunteer, intern- and apprentice labour is an additional strategy to alleviate hardship in difficult economic, social and ecological conditions⁶ and compensate for decreasing family labour.⁷ It is against this background that young people interested in agroecological farming have to look for work and training opportunities.

Training and learning opportunities are indeed a concern for young new entrants. The lack of agroecological training opportunities,⁸ combined with the growing demand for training, creates competition among young people for the spaces on training programs.⁹ To compound this issue, it is difficult to access paid farm work without previous training, while many young people rely on paid work to learn.¹⁰ Many others go through non-institutional farmer training, which is frequently unwaged.¹¹ For these reasons, this report explores the lived

experiences of youth in agriculture using a labour lens.

Young agricultural workers

In this report, we make a distinction between unpaid labour (volunteering), alternative labour (internships and apprenticeships) and paid labour.¹² The broad categories of “unpaid” and “alternative labour” describe any kind of labour that does not involve a traditional exchange of work for pay.¹³ Usually, the arrangements in place for volunteers and interns include some form of compensation such as training, food, housing, in-kind payment or reduced wage (a stipend). As we will see, the terms and conditions of the relationship between a young agricultural worker and a farmer, a contractor, public institution or farming company vary a great deal. In all cases, there is an employment relationship, regardless of whether someone is primarily working for pay, for learning or for some form of in-kind compensation. Besides, agricultural workers cannot be described as either volunteers, interns, agricultural workers or peasant farmers. Most of them combine these different working arrangements over a few months or years, consecutively (P13, PP14) or in parallel (PP4, PP7, PP11). While in some cases young workers “progress” from volunteer to intern to

4 Ekers, Michael, Charles Z. Levkoe, Samuel Walker, and Bryan Dale (2016). “Will work for food: agricultural interns, apprentices, volunteers, and the agrarian question.” *Agriculture and human values* 33, no. 3, 705-720; Timmermann, Cristian, and Georges F. Félix (2016). “Agroecology as a vehicle for contributive justice.” *Agriculture and human values* 32, no. 3, 523-538.

5 Ekers et al. (2016), p. 705.

6 Avital, Abigail (2019). “The Role of Unpaid and Alternative Labor on Organic and Sustainability-oriented Farms.” *Senior Projects Spring*. 160; Ekers, M., & Levkoe, C. Z. (2016). ‘Transformations in agricultural non-waged work: From kinship to intern and volunteer labor’. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 6 (2), 179–183.

7 Gorgitano, M. T., C. Paffarini, and B. Torquati (2020). “26. Worldwide opportunities in organic farms: key drivers and research implications of unwaged work.” In *Green metamorphoses: agriculture, food, ecology: Proceedings of the LV Conference of SIDEA Studies*, pp. 964-982. Wageningen Academic Publishers.

8 European Coordination Via Campesina (2016). *Requests of the Youth for Europe*, <https://www.eurovia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ECVC-youth-demands-for-new-Entrants-2016.pdf>

9 Taherzadeh (2020) ‘What can we learn about the pathways of new entrants into sustainable agriculture?’, LWA Blog, <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/pathways-new-entrants-sustainable-agriculture/>

10 Taherzadeh (2020).

11 Ekers et al. (2016).

12 Taherzadeh, Alice (2019). “Learning pathways into sustainable agriculture: the motivations and approaches of young entrant farmers.”

13 Avital (2019).

peasant farmer or shepherd, this sequence is far from straightforward, nor necessarily aimed for.

Unpaid labour: volunteering

“So I was like, oh ... I’ll do some volunteer work. And hopefully, if I have enough experience, I can then actually find a paid job.” (PP13)

Many young agricultural workers rely on volunteer programs such as Wwoofing¹⁴ to get a taste of working the land or gradually acquire skills by spending time on different farms. According to the 50 years old international network, “Wwoofers can develop practical skills and learn about different aspects of organic agriculture and sustainable living”.¹⁵ Out of the 21 young agricultural workers, 7 had several Wwoofing experiences in different countries, often for several months (accumulating for periods of up to two years), and one volunteered on three organic farms she had contacted directly. Several people worked as volunteer on a more casual basis (one day a week or 25 days a year) for CSA schemes, in exchange of vegetables.

Studies show that Wwoofing helps individual farms deal with labour shortages while bringing social benefits such as skills sharing, social movement building, emotional support, and learning new things from volunteers.¹⁶ Yet, volunteering does not offer structural solutions to labour shortage. In addition, many Wwoofers are dissatisfied with the amount or nature of labour required, and there tends to be a lack of communication between hosts

and guests around respective expectations.¹⁷

Alternative labour: internships and apprenticeships

“The apprenticeship is conventional, not organic, but the most you learn on the farm, you work [...] it was fast. I have a certificate, and I could rent farmland with this certificate.” (PP3)

Internships and apprenticeships are other ways to gather experience and skills, by trading labour for training.¹⁸ Out of the 21 young agricultural workers, 14 had experiences as interns or apprentices. The duration of these varied from a few weeks to 1 or 2 years. Internships are designed to acquire practical experience and consist of temporary placements on farm as part of classroom-based or more theoretical agricultural training. Apprenticeships are one or two year programs during which the young worker essentially learns by working and living on the farm. Apprenticeships are often paid at a reduced wage, while internships are either unpaid or paid a small compensation. As with volunteering, farmers tend to rely on interns/apprentices as cheap labour, while passing on their skills and sharing experience. In several countries, state or regional support programs exist that help farmers cover the costs of interns and apprentices. Both interns and apprentices ultimately earn an agricultural certificate which gives access to the profession and young farmer payment schemes.

Others have drawn attention to the fact that “the

¹⁴ WWOOF stands for Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms. Visitors (Wwoofers) are linked with organic farmers to “promote a cultural and educational exchange, and build a global community conscious of ecological farming and sustainability practices”. For more see <https://wwoof.net>.

¹⁵ <https://wwoof.net/get-started/>

¹⁶ Mostafanezhad, Mary, Krisnawati Suryanata, Saleh Azizi, and Nicole Milne (2015). ““Will weed for food”: The political economy of organic farm volunteering in Hawai‘i.” *Geoforum* 65, 125-133.

¹⁷ Avital (2019); Moysidou, Gesthimani (2020). “Constructing the moral framework of hospitality in non-commercial homestays.” PhD diss., Edinburgh Napier University.

¹⁸ Avital (2019).

dominant model of ecological farm internships privileges white, middle-class young people”¹⁹ who have the financial means to gain work experience through unpaid internships. An issue that “hinders opportunities for a more diverse ecological farming sector”.²⁰

Paid labour: seasonal work, temporary work, waged and freelance work

Paid labour includes the trading of labour against pay. This could be waged work when hired as employee, as seasonal worker or agricultural worker via formal or informal arrangements. Paid work can also be unwaged. This is the case for freelancers/self-employed workers who work for companies, cooperatives or other legal structures that enable farms to operate. The pay and conditions between these different forms of paid labour vary greatly. Out of the 21 young agricultural workers, 11 had experiences as waged agricultural workers hired on a permanent or temporary basis (for several months or years), 7 had seasonal work experience, while at least 5 worked as freelance/self-employed. 6 people were working for different forms of collective/cooperative farms or CSAs (as employees or freelancers), and 4 had their own farms (2 of them coming from agricultural background).

Young agricultural workers who are becoming farm managers know they will need to employ or find (cheap) labour especially at key times of the year. While continuing to learn and work, they become employers and teachers. Some may also need to sell their own labour to other farms (PP1, PP10).

Young agricultural workers' experiences: working conditions and learning opportunities

The rich trajectories of 21 young agricultural workers linked to ECVC across Europe, are presented here to get an understanding of their working and learning conditions and draw lessons learned.

Long working days

All young agricultural workers tend to work very long days, as is common on farms. Working schedules fluctuate according to season and also vary from sector to sector (shepherding vs. vegetable farming). Wwoofing typically includes 4 to 6 hours of work, 5 days a week. Interns and apprentices tend to have more structured working days compared to volunteers. They are usually able to describe their working hours precisely. Paid workers on conventional farms or other companies also have long working hours but clear schedules. For those setting up their own farm or working for CSAs, many hours are not accounted for (for administrative work, evening duties or market days) and the well-documented tendency to self-exploitation quickly surfaces.²¹

Across all categories of workers, living on the farm often means working extra hours. Some explicitly choose not to live on the farm to make it easier to stop working and dedicate time to other aspects of their lives. Many youth refer to working hours that exceed those agreed upon, especially on farms that are struggling. A vegetable grower remembers an internship where she felt that “the extra hours had

¹⁹ Levkoe, Charles Z., and Abena Offeh-Gyimah (2020). “Race, privilege and the exclusivity of farm internships: Ecological agricultural education and the implications for food movements.” *Environment and planning E: nature and space*3, no. 2, 580-598, p. 580.

²⁰ Levkoe and Offeh-Gyimah (2020), p. 580.

²¹ Galt, Ryan E. (2013). “The moral economy is a double-edged sword: Explaining farmers’ earnings and self-exploitation in community-supported agriculture.” *Economic Geography* 89, no. 4, 341-365.



to compensate for a badly organized farm... but they obviously couldn't" (PP25). While some report working excessive hours to the point of exhaustion, others highlight how work and life intersect in ways that they value: "there is no waiting all week for the weekend, no eagerness of doing something else" (PP5).

Food and housing are no highlights

Food experiences while working on farms vary a great deal. Some mention the pleasure of eating fresh produce and sharing collective meals: "On the farm, one person is responsible everyday to make lunch for everybody with products from the farm and the farm shop" (PP25). Many interns and volunteers share every meal with their host and value these moments as opportunities to bring questions about farming: "I was considered a member of the employing family, we ate all our meals together" (PP5). For many others, food is not a highlight. They survive on pasta and cheap food, having little money and/or no access to food

stores. They are provided with basic products, have to hand over their shopping list to the farmer once a week, or are taken to a supermarket on set times.

Housing costs often absorb a substantial part of young workers' low pay. Co-housing, mobile housing or cheap accommodation help keep the costs down, while enabling the mobility and temporary setups that are required to access different work experiences. For those living on the farm, renting a room is not necessarily cheap (an apprentice in Germany paid 470 EUR for food and a room). For those preferring to find accommodation nearby, transportation can be a challenge, if the farm needs to be within biking distance or because money needs to be set aside for car and fuel. Decisions about housing have different implications for young workers with partners – who don't necessarily want to move or live on a farm – or care responsibilities. The fact that apprenticeships and traineeships often require workers to live on-site has been identified elsewhere as a barrier to accessing training.²²

²² Taherzadeh (2020).

Low income

“I don’t know how much I earned there exactly, but where I lived was really cheap.” (PP3 talking about apprenticeship in Switzerland)

“How much do we earn? We earn very little when you compare to how much we work.” (PP1)

For those who get a salary, minimum wage is referred to a lot and appears to constitute a norm that is respected across different employment configurations and contracts. Across Europe, hourly wage tends to vary between 7 and 9 EUR net an hour, with some people mentioning higher (UK, Netherlands) or lower rates (Eastern Europe and Turkey). Practical experience, management skills (e.g. coordinating Wwoofers) and background (such as speaking the local language) are reflected in better pay. A young worker in Spain who sells his own labour to neighbouring farmers explains how he started at 5 EUR an hour to earn 7,5 EUR an hour today (PP10). While pay is low across the board, some shepherds and employees evaluate their pay as sufficient, for the lifestyle they live. Yet, many other paid agricultural workers struggle to make ends meet: *“It’s not a properly good salary because then, here, you must have a car (...) to go to the job. (...) If you live alone, you have, of course, the other expenses. With this amount, I’m struggling a little bit. Let’s say that as a guy of 32, if you think that (...) maybe you want to create a family or something like that, it’s quite hard with the salary” (PP8)*. Some workers mentioned a trade-off between pay and working conditions on small vs. large farms: *“I did small scale farms (...), that made very little money of their own. And they were largely dependent on volunteer intern work. So they have no money to pay you [...] large-scale farms did have the money to pay you, but then you were working in very terrible conditions.” (PP13)* In line with their

own expectations, self-employed/freelance farmers working on CSAs are mostly paid below minimum wage (as low as 4,5 EUR an hour in Hungary (PP23)), as they first need to pay for temporary workers and other expenses including rent, seeds, farm tools or compost.

Young agricultural workers who work as volunteer, intern or apprentice get no pay or a reduced pay. Wwoofers work against food, accommodation and learning. Apprentices and long term interns received a stipend that was around 790 EUR a month in Germany, 800 GBP in the UK, 943 EUR in France, 450 EUR in Italy (paid in black), and as low as 300 CHF in Switzerland while in Belgium and the Netherlands they were unpaid. While young agricultural workers stress other benefits such as learning new skills, ‘free’ food and communal farm living, many are definitely ambivalent about working for free.

Not feeling entitled to a decent pay

Since they are learning, many volunteers, interns and apprentices don’t feel entitled to a proper salary. This is reinforced by the fact that many workers are turned down job (and internship) opportunities for their lack of experience: *“I’m actually volunteering at a farm that I did apply for a job at. They had a job opportunity. And then they said, like, you sound really great, but you just don’t quite have enough experience. And which is fair, they wanted like three years seasonal experience and I only got one and a half ish” (PP17)*. Having internalized that they are, essentially, unskilled labour in training, many young workers don’t even consider the possibility of demanding better working conditions.

Many are willing to labour for free or for a reduced pay out of a strong desire to contribute to resilient food systems: “You can pay me less so you can

develop the farm” (PP3). Empathy with the struggling farmer they work for/with, and awareness that their employer is not making money either, also contribute to what we would characterize as “solidarity labour”. A new entrant farmer shares: “it was ok for me not to get paid because she did not have a salary either” (PP3). Some seasonal or agricultural workers earn more than their employer, leading to feelings of guilt but also acceptance of harsh working conditions. A waged worker from France compares her salary with what the farmer gets and argues: “they take 1200 a month, it is hard to earn more” (PP5). She also shares her ambivalence about being paid extra for her overtime: “When you know the reality of agriculture, it’s sometimes a bit complicated I find to ask for more than just a little” (PP5).

Yet many express concern, frustration, doubts or anger at the idea that they are providing free labour: “(Volunteering) it’s something I disagree with (...) I think young people should be supported to get the experience needed. I don’t think that not having the experience is a justification for not being paid” (PP12). Awareness about how exploitative free labour can be, increases over time as young workers gain experience:

“At the beginning, I did not care about not being paid but after a while I felt it was not so cool that so many people rely on voluntary work and that so many young people want to work and don’t care about payment, that “it gets normal”. (PP18)

“It feels like I’ve got certain knowledge that needs to be reflected, I guess, in the job I have. It’s just a shame that land work isn’t valued more really for what it is”. (PP12)

Making ends meet

Making ends meet with low or no pay is not easy. Young workers cope by embracing low consumption and frugal lifestyles and accepting precarious and

often uncomfortable living conditions. They rely on a creative combination of temporary jobs (sometimes city-based and non-related to agriculture), as well as more permanent jobs on the side. Many participants have a computer-based job on the side, including as teacher, researcher, consultant or NGO-officer. They also tap into government programs that can help finance their internships or farm stays, including at sub-national level (for example around shepherding), often with the support of the farmers who want to hire them. This young French worker explains: *“I mainly did this specialisation (1 year, 12 weeks of classes and the rest on the farm) because it was a way of spending a lot of time with my boss and having a funded job. [...] these positions are subsidised. So it’s interesting. Since my boss has a small farm, he couldn’t necessarily afford to pay an employee”* (PP20). A great variety of student exchange (such as Erasmus), cooperation programmes and support schemes exists for new entrants. These programs are easily accessed by those who are connected to the networks where such information is circulated, but provide very little. Finally, some have a supportive partner who helps compensate for the lack of a reliable income or occasionally rely on parental support and even crowdfunding. Yet, not everybody can afford to work for free or very low wages. Similarly, people with care responsibilities are not necessarily able to adopt the lifestyle or embrace the mobility that is required of young workers. Precarious working conditions therefore reinforce existing inequalities around class, gender and race, enabling some new entrants to explore farming and discouraging others.

A diversity of working arrangements

Working arrangements vary a great deal: from a total absence of any contract to internship and freelance agreements, to the rare cases of permanent waged worker contracts. Young workers often know little

about these arrangements and their implications in terms of insurance, social security or pension and “regret” it later (PP7). Many don’t know what would happen in the case of an accident, how and if they are paid/declared or what their rights are as workers: *“I haven’t been on a contract for quite a long time, but I do get pay slips (...). I know that that’s important to let the government know how much I’m earning and make sure I’m paying tax on it, but other than that, I don’t really know what the laws are really.”* (PP12)

Many workers mentioned being employed on special contracts designed to expedite the hiring seasonal or replacement labour. An agricultural worker in the UK shares: “I’ve got a zero hours contract, it’s a specific type of contract....the one where they basically ... don’t have to give you hours” (PP17). Several workers in France were hired through a simplified process (TESA for Titre emploi simplifié agricole), which enables the farmer to complete 10 administrative procedures in one click: “So [this TESA contract] allows to write on the contract that the person will work 10 hours per week. But in the end, he or she may work 20 hours a week or, conversely, half of the scheduled hours. [...] It gives you a lot of flexibility. (...) It’s mostly for the benefit of the producer” (PP11). To a large extent, the diversity of working arrangements reflects the seasonality of farm work and the need for farmers to easily hire temporary labour at peak times of the year.

Unsurprisingly a few workers mentioned being paid in black, which means their work is not formally recorded or registered for social security or pension. This is problematic for workers as it limits their

possibility to later valorize their work experience. In some countries, access to farmer status is conditioned on showing a minimum number of hours of agricultural work (for example, 1900 hours are required in France to validate one’s professional training).²³ While some paid workers are faced with this issue, it affects all volunteers who work without a contract.

To balance their rights as workers with what the farmer can afford to pay, a few workers describe elaborate forms of bricolage (PP7, PP23, PP24). A young worker in France did 100 hours a month as a volunteer work (against food and housing), 50 hours as waged work and any additional hours paid in black (PP11). This mix provided some work recognition through a formal contract and maximized the pay. Up to 7 youth explained how they worked for CSAs or cooperatives as freelance/self-employed workers, but on a permanent basis. In these cases, we noted a variety of working arrangements to compensate for the lack of adequate legal structures for cooperative farms.

Across working arrangements, precarity is the norm. Young workers have to navigate both the seasonality and flexibilization of the agricultural labour market, bearing big risks and responsibilities.²⁴

Little or zero negotiation power

Initially, little is discussed between the young agricultural worker and the person hiring them. Often, the conversation revolves around the number of working days and the arrangement for housing and food, on the phone or as they visit the farm. If there is payment involved, the hourly,

²³ As is the case with the Brevet Professionnel Responsable d’Exploitation Agricole (BPREA) in France which gives access to young farmer payment schemes.

²⁴ Kalleberg, Arne L (2009). “Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition.” American sociological review 74, no. 1, 1-22; Vosko, Leah F (2011). Managing the margins: Gender, citizenship, and the international regulation of precarious employment. OUP Oxford.

daily or monthly wage is communicated, almost never negotiated: *“He informed me, we had no discussion”* (PP3). The same is custom practice regarding contracts, insurance or other formal arrangements. A whole range of important issues are left undiscussed, leaving young workers in the dark, afraid to ask, uneasy and uncertain about what they are supposed to do. This comprises the tasks they will be performing and how to do them correctly. Unless the work is part of a structured internship/apprentice, learning opportunities seem to be the least discussed of all: it is assumed that the young worker will learn by doing.

Relationship to employer

In light of these rather vague working arrangements, the nature of the relationship between the young worker and their employer has a strong influence on the working and learning experience. Some youth mention a strong bond, an inspiring connection to farmers who become friends and mentors. In a majority of cases, however, the relationship is tainted by an overall feeling of discomfort, at times induced by the fact that the boundary between employer and host is fluid and that the worker is “part of the family”. The lack of clarity and absence of an “open dialogue” (PP12) combined with their perceived lack of experience or skills make many young workers feel disempowered and frustrated: *“it makes me a bit angry with myself because I think that even in this very informal setting, there’s nothing wrong with asking what are the conditions. Still, I struggled to ask for explanations and ask, what do I give you and what do you give me and what’s the exchange?”* (PP16).

Gaining negotiation power

Over time, young workers acquire experience, knowledge and skills and have a better sense of what they are worth: “At the beginning, I was

feeling guilty about being paid but now I have more experience, I feel it is normal that they pay us” (PP5). Experience gradually gives more negotiation power, especially if the workers perform tasks or roles that are crucial for their employer such as coordinating volunteers. Experience also gives workers a range of other farm jobs to compare this one with, which is key to assessing a situation and possibly making demands. Speaking the language is another factor that supports workers’ ability to (re-)negotiate working conditions. In the case of casual or seasonal work, being hired as a team gives more leverage. This is true for self-organized workers labouring for different farms (e.g. *quadrillas* in Spain) or groups of shepherds/alpers spending full summers up in the mountains. Some young workers also identified that working for farms or sectors that are thriving, in regions that are doing well economically or benefit from government support, offers them more opportunities and better pay. To the contrary, many young workers see their employer struggle, and feel they are not in a position to make any demands.

The art of setting limits

In choosing paths that are off the beaten track, young agricultural workers are often under a lot of pressure. It takes courage and reflexivity to set limits. A skill that has to be learned. Especially after having lived difficult experiences, many workers set limits when choosing a next work place. Some young farmers are clear about the fact that they want to be paid minimum wage or have a formal working arrangement, and many explicitly state that they do not want to be paid in black. For others, deciding not to live on the farm, setting times to start and stop working or deliberately going part-time farm is a strategy that helps them stay sane. It also gives them the space to nourish other projects or share a life with a partner that does not farm. One new entrant farmer with two children remembers:

“the most important thing I learned on that farm was to stop working... to learn to accept that the work never stops” (PP22). The choice to focus on a sector that has less intense work during part of the year, such as fruits, shepherding or horticulture is another way of setting boundaries. Setting limits is also considered important to protect hopes and values. Ideological disagreements or different visions about farming practice is a reason to look for opportunities elsewhere.

Crossing boundaries to discover them

Figuring out where limits lie is difficult and often discovered only when boundaries are crossed. One participant from Eastern Europe reflects back on why he did not leave a devastating work environment, that included exposure to pesticides, extreme heat and humiliating conditions, as a seasonal migrant worker in the UK. “I am part of a generation who is always told to be too soft, that we are worthless... not suitable for heavy jobs” (PP4). More generally, listening to one’s body, taking a break when others continue to work, even when sick or in pain, is a difficulty that many youth recognize: “It’s [...] socially stressful because if you’re sick then somebody else has to work more and you cannot stop working or call for help. I think that is something, like the emotional work is also a big part of why it’s hard” (PP21). Another worker who sells his labour and operates without contract and insurance doesn’t feel it is ok to stop working when in pain, and would rather “take an aspirin and work with a wristband” (PP10). Especially when working for a struggling farmer, young workers find it hard to set and respect their boundaries: “I did not manage to leave, he was alone” (PP5).

Many young workers highlight the importance of peer support to help them recognize unacceptable working conditions: “I started to reach out to the

members of ECVC Youth, and ask for their opinion, which was for me super important, because I talked to one person which was super supportive and said, “Just leave” (PP16).

Dealing with difficult experiences

When sharing their experiences, all workers highlight the bliss of being outside, immersed in nature, doing something useful with their hands and having a life that is congruent with their values. Yet their working experiences are fraught with challenges impacting their body, mind and soul. Many describe heavy physical work, back pain, hurt, and accidents and in the case of conventional farming, the fear to see the use of chemicals (PP8) or the destructive effects of pesticides (PP4). One worker shares: “At 20, we don’t listen to our body. It is nice to come across farmers who train you well, who show you how to take care of your back” (PP5).

Another who is on sick leave when we speak, refers to the burnouts of her colleagues and questions the very possibility of combining farm work with other projects (PP25).

Young workers also share the monotony of repetitive tasks and the stress of being left alone with no guidance and too many responsibilities, having to improvise or lacking clarity on what is expected of them. One Wwoofer with little farm experience was “left alone on the farm with 15 goats for 2 weeks” (PP5). Adding to this, many feel lonely or isolated. “I’m really missing people I could talk to or ... Yeah, who are at my age have the same struggles somehow [...] There are some days where I’m just thinking in circles the whole day. And at the end of the day, I think like, oh, well, what just happened ... just like a zombie” (PP18). While many enjoy chosen solitude (especially shepherds), isolation can be particularly challenging in times of difficulties.

Many volunteer workers feel reluctant to report problematic situations, in large part because they empathize with their employer: “The working conditions on the farm were not acceptable, but it was not intentionally mean. When it’s someone who really exploits people and takes advantage of Wwoofing to exploit people, I have no qualms about saying that. But here, it was someone who was in a personal, human situation so hard that, in fact, he was exploiting people. But he himself was at the bottom of the hole so I didn’t dare to put any negative comments” (PP11). None of them left negative reviews on the Wwoofing website, which could have prevented others from going through such harsh experiences.

Gender-based and intersectional discrimination and violence

Agriculture is heavily gendered and racialized as a sector, which inevitably shapes young workers’ experiences. Many commented on the prevalence of gender-assigned roles and on the separation between male and female tasks. While women are directed towards care work, tasks requiring physical strength or the use of machines continue to be seen as the quasi-exclusive domain of men. An intern spending a year on a farm in Norway shares: “my work was typical women work, cooking and cleaning. I was pushed in this type of work. After that I had to say “I want to learn and work on the farm”” (PP18). Many women workers report sexist comments, sexual harassment and various forms of gender-based violence by farmers or other workers on the farm, and received no support when they tried to denounce these. One female worker was asked by the farmer if she would marry him within 2 hours of her arrival (PP5). While some schemes exist to support the entry of women in farming, working in an everyday sexist environment makes them question their value, skills and even presence

on the farm: “They trust more a person who is male and has no formation than me” (PP18). Another worker shares: “It’s not that he tells me you can’t do it, but all these strong messages come out of his body language. Of course, this discourages me” (PP16).

For women and non-binary workers, the need to conform to conservative gender norms in the countryside is unsettling, as is facing forms of gender-based discrimination. A non-binary worker specifically chose a queer-owned farmer to volunteer at so that they would “feel able to sort of show up authentically” (PP17). But they were discouraged to introduce themselves as such to visitors: “Why do you need to go on about it? Like, you don’t have to go on about it here” (PP17).

As we mostly spoke to white Europeans, we could not explore the racialization of agriculture and its impacts on the lived experience of workers. However, many referred to race, gender and class-based hierarchies between workers on the same farms, alluding to well-documented dynamics of internal migration within the EU and racialized seasonal labour. Being often in privileged positions (e.g. speaking the language), several participants shared how they had worked along migrant workers on conventional farms or coordinated the work of interns and volunteers.

Finding a farm to learnwork

“... how to learn, how to train yourself? [...] you have to practice. So how do you find a way to work on a farm while learning, knowing that the dilemma is often that the farms that recruit people are big farms where the agricultural and human practices are not necessarily adapted to what we want. And the small farms that interest us often don’t have the means to recruit people.” (PP11).



Many young workers have a rather clear view on the skills they would like to acquire such as working with animals or cheesemaking. They also have a clear view on the sort of agriculture they want to learn about. The strategies used to find a farm to “learnwork” are diverse. For many young people from urban backgrounds, Wwoofing is the most common entrance into ‘finding’ a farm. Others mention regional or sector specific platforms, school related websites, and facebook. Several young agricultural workers with friends or relatives in agriculture, with previous working experience as consultants or ties to food movements tap into their own networks. Many workers have difficulties finding a job or internship for lack of opportunities in their area. They look for adverts online, send their CVs to farms which they find appealing or reach out to local CSAs. They are sometimes turned down for “lack of experience” (PP12) even after having spent months on other farms.

For some, the selection of a farm is done without having a clear idea or expectations beyond doing something with agriculture. Others have developed

elaborate criteria to ensure that their farm stay will deliver on their learning expectations in terms of practices as well as work environment. Criteria used include: having co-workers, type of farm, type of products and techniques, location and accessibility, type of housing, or clear upfront communication. Several workers mentioned the importance about asking the right questions, before agreeing to work on a farm or as a shepherd. A practice that can be learned and is encouraged during training programs and shared among young agricultural workers networks (PP13).

Learning space is not a given

Acquiring new skills and knowhow requires space to learn. Some people go through specific training programs and do interns/apprenticeships on dedicated farms, and speak positively of their experience: “I worked with a farmer that liked to explain everything...by the end of the year I was a bit tired of it, but it was good” (PP22). They were encouraged “to explore”, set and share expectations, and ask questions: “as an intern, I felt

that I was entitled to learn all aspects of the farm...I looked at the farm in a different way then, than now as a paid worker, more open somehow" (PP25). A young French intern describes how they set aside "an hour here and there to chat about [his and the farmer's] mutual experiences" (PP20).

This is not the experience of all working learners. Many young people go through unstructured trajectories and seek to learn through volunteering or doing all sorts of paid work. They sometimes end up on hosting farms with a genuine interest in creating learning space. Often, however, expectations do not match: the young agricultural worker is primarily looking to learn, while the farmer is looking for help and does not have the time for questions or to accompany unexperienced workers. "This took time for me to understand" says one worker in the Netherlands (PP14). Another worker recalls that "if there was something I wanted to learn and I mentioned, it often didn't come up just because there were other jobs to do" (PP12).

Running a farm is not learned in school

Some tasks are relatively easy to learn. Through monotasking or carrying out repetitive tasks during volunteering, internships or paid work, young workers learn specific manual tasks, "bits and pieces". They learn different tasks by moving to different workplaces or by staying longer on one farm. An intern shepherd (or Alper) learned fencing, moving the herd, the landscape, recognize the cows, milking: "It went really well" (PP21). One new entrant who benefited from a two-year training for aspiring farmers in Belgium completed a full growing season on one farm, and then did some "intern shopping" to learn specific skills such as managing a vegetable box scheme (PP22).

In contrast with learning specific practices, young

workers find it more complicated to learn how to run a farm, as they don't have access to information and decisions about planning, marketing and finances. Another challenge that many face is experiencing full farming cycles, since their stay tends to be temporary or seasonal. A biointensive market gardener specifies: "it's not something you can learn in a few months, because you have to see the cycle from one season to another, and you can really only do that in two years" (PP24).

Many people referred to the difficulty of learning the right skills because of the absence of adapted agroecological training programs. Or others, took a lot of time to finding out about their existence. A new entrant recalls: "I [first] started a conventional farm training when I wanted to go into farming. They laughed at me 'you don't have land and you want to do organic?' So, I quit that training" (PP22).

Passing on skills: from grandmothers to YouTube

Young farmers that grew up on farms or in families with considerable kitchen gardens or orchards mention their parents, but mostly refer to their grandparents when it comes to knowledge around soil, heirloom seeds or running small mixed farms: "*I got a lot of skills from my grandparents, especially from my grandmother, because she was the one saving the seeds and caring for the animals and the vegetables.... I was just imitating her*" (PP4). Neighbours also provide inspiration: "*You look at what your neighbor is doing and then you just imitate him, so it's based not on training but on imitation*" (PP1). When neighbours or family are caught up in conventional agriculture, young farmers have to reskill themselves through other means (PP9, PP8, PP10).

Many young agricultural workers are not part of

any of these circles. They have to learn by doing the job, through observation and asking questions. Knowing how destabilizing it is to arrive on a farm as a without experience, many of them are eager to pass on what they learned to others (PP14, PP22, PP23, PP24). All of the new entrants we spoke to spend time creating learning opportunities for others. Having been confronted themselves with the lack of practical opportunities to learn, all CSA workers host interns on their farms, “do a lot of workshops and trainings and all that” (PP14) and most of them are also involved in the creation of networks of training farms or programs for future farmers. The internet, books and YouTube are welcome complements when confronted with a disease on the farm (PP14) or to learn new ecological techniques (PP10). So are farm visits to colleagues with more experience (PP9).

Parents pushing back

For many parents and other relatives of young agricultural workers it is hard to imagine that becoming a farmer, a shepherd or landworker is a wise choice. It is a big decision: “it is not really a career choice, more a life style choice” (PP25). Many young workers refer to their parents being worried or wanting a more secure and better paid job for their kids: “There is family pressure. My mum is scared. She believes I will fail” (PP5). Another shares: “They’re always asking what I’m going to do afterwards and if I’m going to work for a bigger charity or a bigger pay [...] There’s a certain amount of expectation I think, especially as I’ve had-- I’ve got a master’s degree” (PP12). This parental concern around putting university degrees to use, is likely stronger for those of middle-class background. However, families with second generation agricultural backgrounds are equally worried or dismissive. A new entrant from Romania used his heritage money to buy a farm. His mother

told him that “it’s a waste of money [...] that my father would have liked me to be somebody else, not a farmer” (PP4). An intern in Germany shared the news with her grandmother and was told: “Oh my God. Because she grew up on a farm and she never wanted to stay there” (PP18). Over time, some parents feel reassured and even become supportive: “my parents were worried at first, but now they understand better the why and also see it is possible” (PP25). While most agricultural workers are happy to be fulfilling their own dream rather than the expectations their parents have for them, the question of alternative life choices (and “doing something” with their degree) remains at the back of their mind, as a backup option or as a possibility to explore.

Setting up a farm or looking for an agricultural job

The new entrants we spoke with have overcome some of the many barriers to entry. They managed to get access to land (including through family (PP10), “a friendly farm that let us use one hectare” (PP14) or communal land (PP23)); found the right people to collaborate with; found an appropriate legal structure for the (collective) farm; have the right certificates; have some financial resources; and acquired the confidence to launch their project. All new entrants depend either on other sources of income or have a partner who works outside farming. They mostly teamed up with others with various levels of experience, together covering a range of different skills and jointly making decisions. Some haven’t managed, but “really want” to start their own business (PP8). Some youth, however, do no longer see themselves setting up a farm: “to be honest, during the last years, I slowly lost my ambition to open my farm [...] I was always trying to develop some projects with some friends, sharing ideas, looking for some opportunities, [...]”



but I believe that in this period, especially in the area where I live where the land is so scarce and so expensive, I don't have the possibility to do that right now." (PP7).

Many young workers refer to setting up a farm not as something they are considering but as the "ultimate dream" (PP12). Some do not start planning their own projects because they don't feel ready or "want to first learn more" (PP5). One farm employee has "considered to become a partner in an existing farm cooperative, but decided it is better to keep alive the dream of setting up her own project" (PP25). Another worker is "scared of the idea of setting up a farm on his own", and decided to "be relaxed about it", to learn more and different skills (PP20). Not foreclosing the possibility to leave one day, is surely part of the reasons for not setting up one's own farm. One female youth thinks she will probably work for 5 more years as an agricultural worker "or maybe do something else" (PP18). Others do not aspire to set up a farm but rather look for a more or less permanent agricultural job. One

farm employee is comfortable in the combination of farm work, activism and university work while another is "hesitant in letting go of this part time office job because it does give me some financial stability" (PP16). An Alper that works with cows during the summer months stresses "how good it is to give the responsibility of the herd back to the farmer in September" (PP21). Working in agriculture for young people does not necessarily mean setting up of a farm. Some envisage a life as a landworker. In both cases, they mostly find hurdles on the way.

Key tensions (to address)

1. Young agricultural workers in Europe are working and learning on struggling small organic farms

The context in which young agricultural workers have to look for opportunities to work and learn is difficult. Many peasant farms in Europe are in precarious situations. Agroecology, organic or biodynamic farming is labour intensive and

attracting volunteers or interns may be appealing to address the labour problem. At the same time, many young agricultural workers do not come from an agricultural background and are outside of formal/conventional training programs. They have few options as to where and how to acquire relevant work experience. To learn, they end up working for free or low pay on struggling small organic farms.

Young workers learn while providing free or cheap labour, which compensates for a structural lack of financial resources on small farms. Low farmer income thus directly affects the working and training conditions of new entrants. In other words, the failure to provide a decent income for peasant farmers puts the training of, and transfer of skills to, future farmers in danger. This raises questions about how to better support young workers (volunteers, interns and paid) and their hosting farms, including financially, while pointing to the need to structurally create conditions in which small farms can thrive.

2. Cheap labour as solidarity labour

Many young agricultural workers who are new to farming are against free labour but do unpaid work out of solidarity with farmers who are struggling financially. In return, they hope to learn as well as to contribute to a different agricultural future. Some develop close relationships or an emotional bond with their employer, which reinforces their willingness to support them. For most workers, however, there is no strong affinity. What they experience is empathy with another human being who is facing hardship, and to the extent possible, they want to help (even though they soon realize they can not really fix things). The difficult context, their own lack of experience, and lack of knowledge of agricultural workers' rights (when it comes to pay, hours and contracts), means that many of them are unable to set limits around what working conditions

they find acceptable. Gradually, they discover these limits and develop the skill of asserting these. This situation raises questions around the human cost of free/cheap labour of young agricultural workers and how to make visible and recognize all the solidarity labour that is provided.

3. Lack of recognition of volunteering experience

Volunteer work is not recognised as work. In some situations, young people may be okay with doing unpaid work but everyone involved should acknowledge that what they contribute is work. Importantly, volunteers point to learning the skills as the key thing they are hoping to get from their unpaid work experience, and too often this need remains unmet. As volunteering comes with no structured or dedicated space for learning, it operates better as a taster to explore agriculture. Once that decision is made, internships and apprenticeships are mostly better designed to meet learning expectations. Although some youth are really good at crafting their own learning trajectory through a bricolage approach involving different working arrangements on different farms. The burning question for volunteer work is how can it be formally recognized as work experience, so as to enable access to social security, and also count towards the hours that one will need to enter formal training, acquire farmer status or find paid agricultural jobs.

4. Unpaid and alternative work as entry points into farming reinforce inequalities

Many young people cannot afford to do unpaid work or long internships or apprenticeships for a stipend below the living wage. Many farmers do not have the means to pay young agricultural workers during their training. This situation creates additional hurdles for people without savings, social safety nets or family support, and considerably

limits access to people with care responsibilities. It further reinforces inequalities along class, race and gender. In order to enable a broad diversity of youth to work in agriculture, it is important to find ways to financially support young people during their work-learning trajectories.

5. Flexibility mechanisms for farmers is trouble for young agricultural workers

In a struggling farming sector, mechanisms have been put in place to support farmers with the easy and flexible hiring of labour. These mechanisms play an important role and recognize the constraints farmers are facing in recruiting seasonal workers. Yet, they are designed from the perspective of the employer and reinforce the precariousness of young workers, as in the case with zero hours contracts, or freelance work which do not offer any income guarantee to workers. Too often the lived experiences of workers are made invisible. To improve working conditions for agricultural workers in general, and young agricultural workers in particular, farmers need better support to address the thorny labour issue. This includes giving them the means to hire a sufficient workforce, while create decent working conditions and pay. This is key to farm transmission and generational renewal.

6. Not all work settings are appropriate for learning

Young people have to work while learning and to learn while working (paid or unpaid). Too often, they find themselves in precarious situations that don't allow them to learn and develop their self-confidence. The workspaces themselves rarely create the best conditions to observe, experiment, question, and transmit. It is crucial to acknowledge the need for learning in all working arrangements – including unpaid labour, alternative labour and paid work. Learning spaces should be adequately crafted and

learning expectations should be discussed before and during work experiences. It is equally important to support the farms that are hosting and training the youth, to ensure learning can take place in good conditions. Some successful initiatives exist that do this, in self-organized training networks, which could be expanded. In some places, examples of support schemes exist that financially support farms hosting apprentices and interns.

7. Structural changes are needed to make agriculture work, including for young people

The transition to just food systems and agroecology requires big numbers of skilled agricultural labour. Many young people are attracted to building the farms of our future and want a job in the sector, but are confronted with the impacts of very low farmer incomes and the de-valorisation of the profession. Many would like to be part of worker-owned cooperatives or community supported collaborative structures, as only a few of them want to or are able to do this alone. It is therefore important to develop innovative legal structures that facilitate the setting up of collective or shared farms. In line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other people working in rural areas (UNDROP), it is key to ensure that the legal and policy frameworks governing agricultural labour – including unpaid and alternative labour – support the realization of young agricultural workers' rights, including their rights to safe and healthy working conditions (art. 14), to work free from violence and harassment (art. 14), as well as their rights to land (art. 17) and to an adequate standard of living (art. 16). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of states to “create an enabling environment with opportunities for work for peasants and other people working in rural areas and their families that provide remuneration allowing for an adequate standard of living” (art 13.3).