

Agrarian Migrant workers in times of Covid-19 pandemic: The cases of Spain and Portugal

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Introduction

The agricultural system of production in Southern Europe has undergone deep changes in the last two decades;

The changes are also evident in Northern Europe and North América.

There are differences, not only between Northern, Eastern, and Southern European countries, but also within those groups.

One of the results of the research is the differences between similar countries in terms of produce (Spain, Portugal and Italy)

One difference is related to institutional factors.



The regions studied

- Portugal:
 - Alentejo, Interior and the Coastline (Costa Alentajana)
 - Algarve, between the coastline and the mountains
 - Oeste (West-litoral, north of Lisbon)
 - Wine producing regions (Douro, Bairrada, etc),
- Spain
 - Huelva
 - El Ejido
 - Almería

Regions where the immigrant working population is increasing significantly

Regions producing fruits and vegetables - berries,

Methodological aspects

After desk research starting in late 2017, on migrant worker in Portugal and Spain:

- Interviews from 2018 to August 2021 with migrant workers, trade unions, associations of protection for migrant workers, NGOs; policy makers; local inhabitants (neighbours); managers and former managers of facilities (lodging, restauration, transport, and farms):
- Interviews in 2019 and 2020 with owners, migrant and non-migrant workers;
- Interviews in person, but also through whatsapp, skype, telephone, email;
- Adaptation through the pandemic, but most recent interviews in 2020 and 2021
- Some interviews and contacts evolved toward life-stories;
- Fewer interview of farmers, especially in Spain - compensated by former farmers or managers;

Spanish Case

Huelva - Strawberries, berries, fruits, vegetables;

Almería - fruits and vegetables;

Workers - up until 2021, most workers come from Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa;

From Morocco, mostly women, with family and children in the country of origin;

Bilateral agreement between Spain and Morocco;

Few workers from Eastern Europe; increase of people from Asia;

- Production: strawberries, berries (red-berries), tomato, cherry tomato, cucumber, melon, watermelon, courgette, pepper, green bean; lemon, orange, etc

Portuguese Case

- Alentejo (interior and the sea coast) - berries, strawberries, cucumber, avocado, kiwi; (oranges and lemons as traditional products)
- Algarve (Olhão) - berries, strawberries, cucumber;
- Oeste (North of Lisbon) - berries, pears, apples;
- Workers from Eastern Europe, Subsaharian Africa, and Asia
 - Sub-Saharan Africa (Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, DR of Congo, few from Northern Africa (mostly men));
 - Eastern Europe: Ukraine, Poland, Roumania, Moldavia, Bulgaria;
 - Asia: Bangladesh, Thailand, Nepal, Pakistan, India;
- Production: strawberries, berries (red-berries), tomato, cherry tomato, pears, apples, cucumber, melon, watermelon, courgette, pepper, green bean; grapes; lemon, orange, etc

Spanish Case - impact of Covid

Huelva (also Almería):

Reduction of work for migrants;

Worsening working conditions;

High risk of contamination for working closely and in groups, overcrowded transport and overcrowded living and sleeping spaces.

Slight increase of local or “Spanish” workers (as happened between 2008-2012, because of economic crisis) but not a coming back of previous levels;

Some differences of regions given the specialization processes and migrant adaptations

Portuguese Case - impact of Covid

Alentejo - especially, but not limited to **Odemira** (news), government intervention;

Also other regions in South, namely Algarve and Oeste

Reduction of work for migrants;

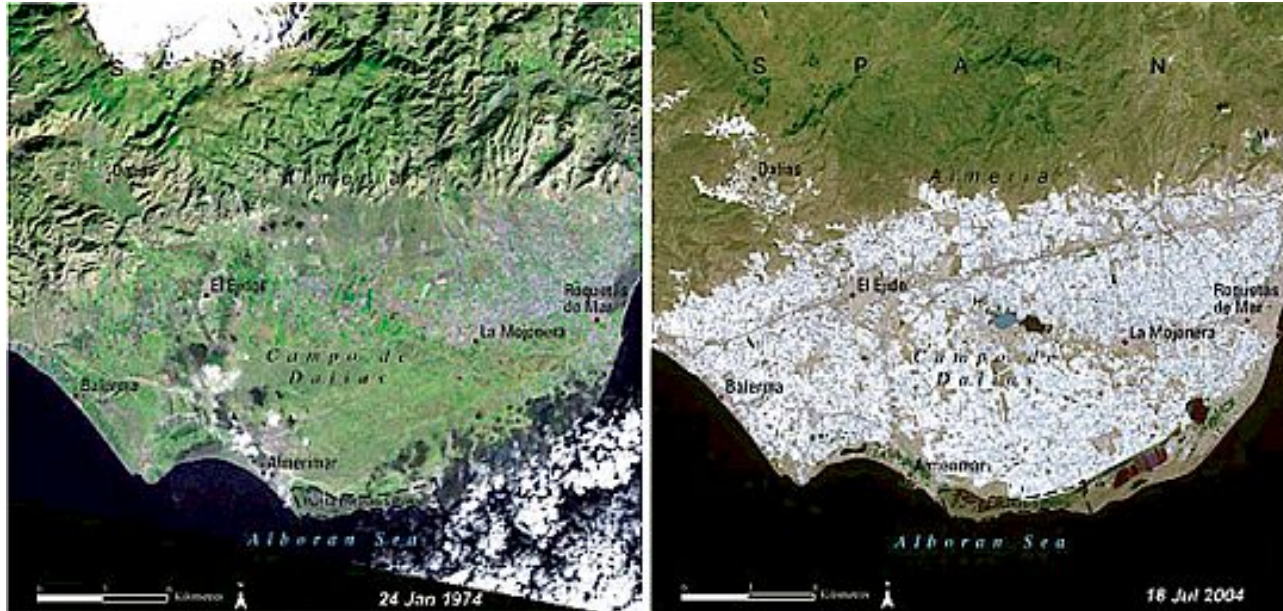
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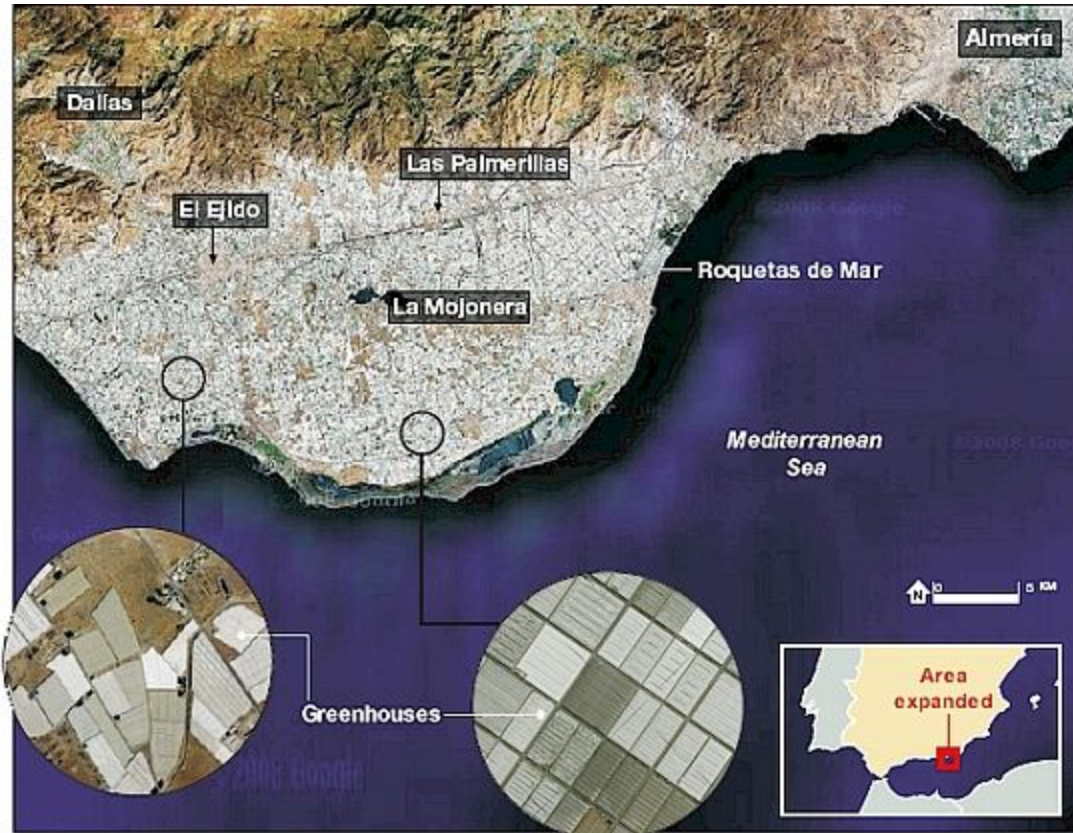
Very slight increase of local or “Portuguese” workers (as happened between 2008-2012, because of economic crisis) but not a coming back of previous levels;

Growth in Almería Greenhouses 1974-2004 - now called the "sea of plastic"

But the history starts at least in 1956 in those regions of Spain and the 1980s in Portugal



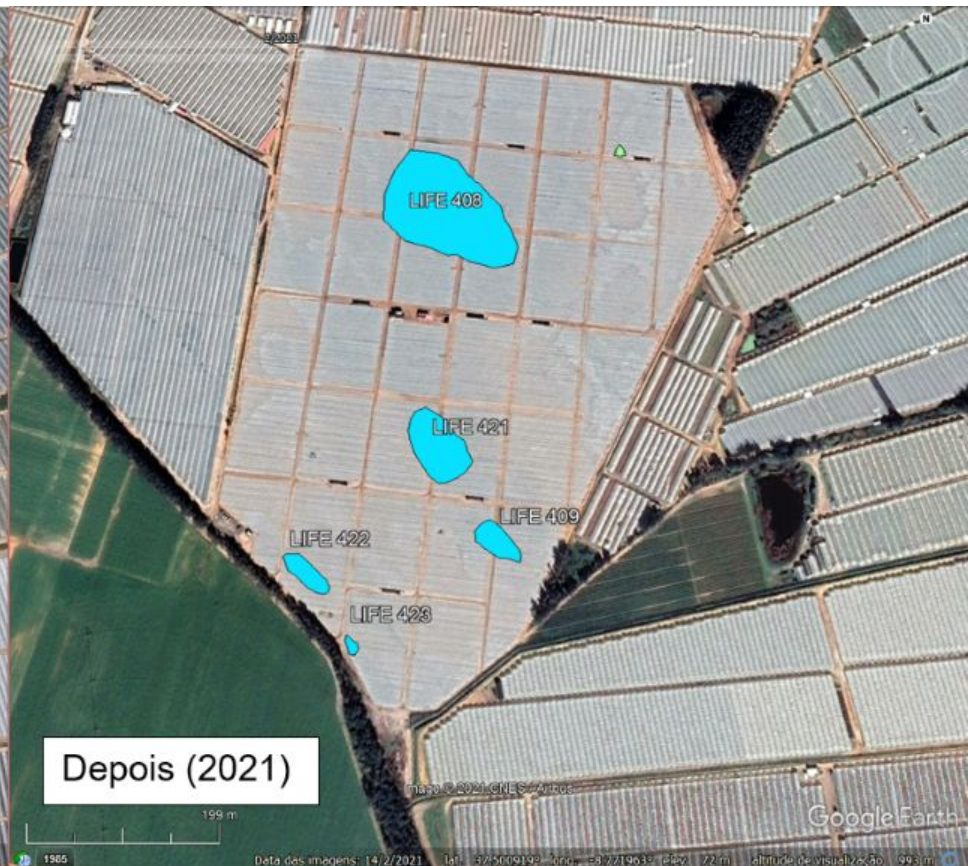
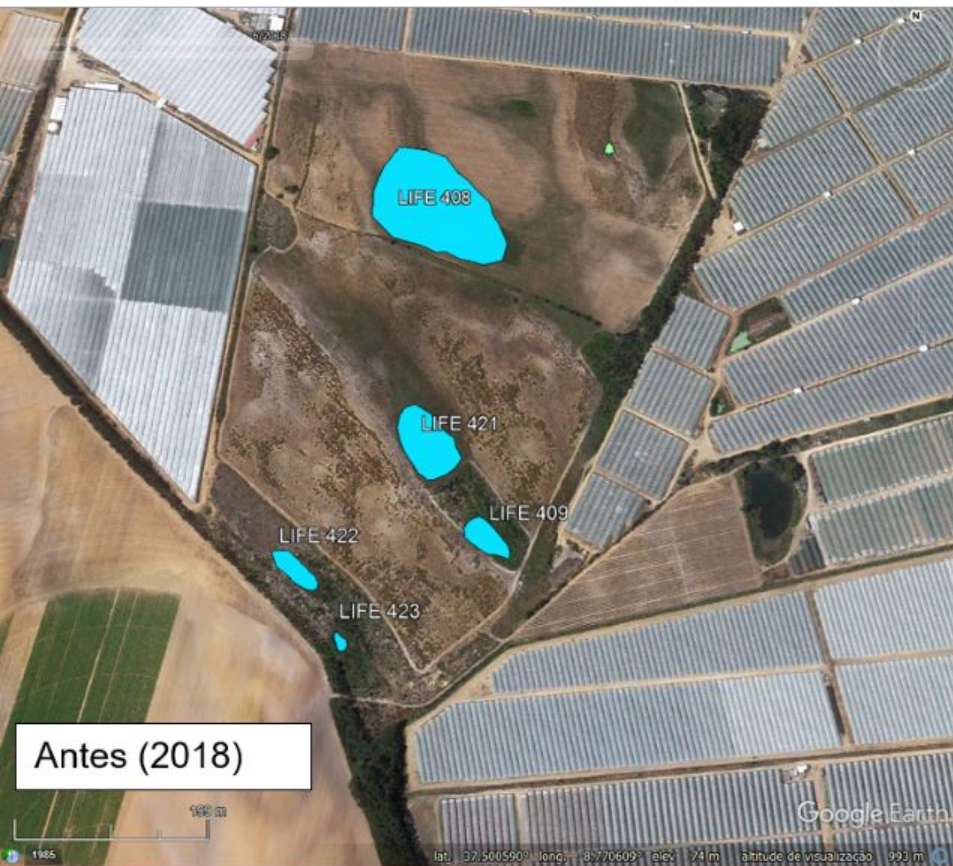
Spain - El Ejido and Almería



In both countries, growth of the surface dedicated to greenhouses does not show signs of losing momentum.

The only limit is the lack of land, this is true in Spain, less so in Portugal, where, despite activist opposition, the extension of greenhouses is constant, even during the pandemic.

Portugal - Vale da Figueira - Alentejo, close to the sea



View from São Teotónio of Vale da Figueira - Alentejo Coastline.

Other matters:

Impact of greenhouses
on biodiversity,

Here, in this picture and
the picture above,
ponds are
disappearing, given the
growth of the cultivation
area and the habitat of
rare species are
decreasing.



Discussion of the results

- Institutional aspects:
 - bilateral agreements - Spain with Morocco, which mean that more than 20 thousands Moroccan women are in the three areas I have mentioned, making the first group of workers, for strawberries
 - Portugal has other bilateral agreements (Thailand, Nepal) that brought hundreds of workers;
 - Contracts: some do not have contracts, some have. Many with a contract do not have it with them;
 - Abusive clauses in contracts
 - Abusive behaviors,
 - Identification documents
 - Mafias and exploitive or criminal organizations deal the business of finding workers, doing the paperwork (and control), transport, local accommodation, the return;
 - Temporary work managed by shadow companies and organizations that often disappear.
 - Debts and bondage;
 - Lack of control and regulation by national and local authorities, and more so in Portugal.

Discussion of the results

- Economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis - increase of discriminatory pricing (lower and higher wages than before the crisis);
 - Most of the cost are passes to the workers;
 - Difficult time for workers to find a job, and employers to find workers
 - Policy and political impact - wider discussion of the “industrial agriculture and its abuses (of workers, natural reserves, and more broadly the local and global environments);
 - wages: higher in Spain, wage rate oscillating between 2/hour to 5 or even 10
 - Technology, much more developed in Spain (7 decades of investment whereas in Portugal, 2 to 3 decades)
 - Control of workers - often with no access to contracts or identity papers (lack of mobility or change jobs); all this makes abuse (next page) easier;
 - Shadow organizations, managing temporary workers
 - Institutional aspects - from bilateral agreement between countries to



Discussion of the results

- Ecological impact
 - locally continuing destruction of **biodiversity**,
 - pollution with the seas of plastic;
 - lack of water
- Social Impact
 - lack of sanitation and health services
 - amplification of transmission of diseases in overcrowded spaces
 - abuse of worker (moral and sexual harassment)
 - Not all migrant on the same footing - **exit** easier for people from Eastern) Europe
 - From March 2020 to April 2021, lack of regulation (working conditions, housing, sanitary conditions);
 - Two cases of increase of covid-19 cases discussed in the media - Almería in Spain and Odemira in Portugal, affecting the migrant populations.