

# SEASONAL PRODUCTS AND THE RISK OF EXPLOITATION

At this time of year, when families in developed countries are preparing for celebrations, how many of us think about the conditions under which seasonal products are made? The toys and gifts traditionally exchanged at this time of year are produced year-round, often in countries where labour standards come under regular scrutiny – but is this the case with production closer to home? While not usually considered a high exploitation risk, production of seasonal items and, in particular, items with short shelf lives puts great pressure on suppliers in developed countries. Temporary workers may be recruited to pluck turkeys, process vegetables for supermarkets or prepare flowers to decorate the home (not to mention harvesting and potting Christmas trees).

## SEASONAL MIGRANT LABOUR IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

Ever more often, these strenuous, low-paid jobs are filled by migrants who have limited employment choices because of language issues or a lack of qualifications. In addition to facing long hours on low pay, they may be exploited by employers who misrepresent their employment rights, or by agents and labour providers who prey on their desperate need for work.

Added to this is the risk of agents in overseas countries persuading individuals to pay them fees, legal in their own country, in return for the promise of work that either fails to materialise on arrival in a foreign country or is not as it seems. For example, workers may be promised 40-hour work weeks in packing departments only to find themselves picking produce on farms with weather-dependent working hours. Others have reported significantly lower wages than expected.

## EXPLOITATION WITHIN THE EU

Take the example of a Bulgarian couple who worked on a farm in France, picking fruit and vegetables. Hired legally, they were nonetheless seriously exploited. They were required to pick in cold, wet conditions and, despite not having warm clothes or money to buy any, were not provided with suitable work wear by their

*Further information*

[SGS Safeguards No. 136/15 - Modern Slavery Act 2015](#)

[Stronger Together - Case Study - Worker Awareness Training](#)

[European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights - Severe Worker Exploitation - the SELEX Project](#)

[Global Slavery Index - Improving Protection for Migrant Domestic Workers in Australia](#)

[International Labour Organization - Sustainable Development Goals 2030](#)

employer. After working for five months for 15–16 hours a day, they were paid for only six weeks. This is just one of the 217 case studies referenced by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in their 2015 report *Severe labour exploitation: workers moving within or into the European Union*.

## GLOBAL SLAVERY

At the more critical end of the spectrum is the rising incidence of trafficked or bonded labour and other forms of modern slavery. The Global Slavery Index estimates that 35 million people are enslaved worldwide, mostly in manufacturing, construction and agriculture. The annual profits from forced labour and slavery are estimated by the ILO to be US\$150 billion.

## POSITIVE ACTION

These issues are increasingly being addressed through legislation, with higher fines and longer sentences, and improved rates of detection. Initiatives such as Stronger Together in the UK bring together government and enforcement agencies, charities and commercial organisations to address the problem and protect vulnerable individuals who have been unwittingly caught up in it. For example, Stronger Together has developed a workshop to raise migrant workers' awareness of exploitation in their communities and of ways to escape



it. The workshop was piloted at a farm in Lincolnshire, UK, that hires up to 150 agency workers of varying nationalities in its peak Christmas and summer seasons, and has since been rolled out nationally.

## A DUTY OF TRANSPARENCY

In the meantime, transparency is increasingly required. Across many countries in the developed world, companies are being required to report on the action they take to reduce the risk of slavery in their supply chains. While these requirements cover only reporting, not specific action to be taken, it is hoped that this development will encourage companies to work together to make a positive impact in the arena of exploitation and forced labour.

SGS has developed a range of services to support companies in understanding their full supply chains and to respond to the reporting requirements. For further information please contact:

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