

Food Security at Whose Expense? A Critique of the Canadian Temporary Farm Labour Migration Regime and Proposals for Change

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ABSTRACT

Temporary farm labour migration schemes in Canada have been justified on the premise that they bolster food security for Canadians by addressing agricultural labour shortages, while tempering food insecurity in the Global South via remittances. Such appeals hinge on an ideology defining migrants as racialized outsiders to Canada. Drawing on qualitative interviews and participant observation in Mexico, Jamaica and Canada, we critically analyse how Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program is tied to ideological claims about national food security and agrarianism, and how it purports to address migrant workers' own food insecurity. We argue remittances only partially, temporarily mitigate food insecurity and fail to strengthen migrant food sovereignty. Data from our clinical encounters with farm workers illustrate structural barriers to healthy food access and negative health consequences. We propose an agenda for further research, along with policies to advance food security and food sovereignty for both migrants and residents of Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Temporary labour migration schemes that link people from the Global South with farm jobs in the Global North are often justified on the grounds of safeguarding global food security. Although food insecurity is widely recognized as a driver of migration, food security concerns have been largely ignored in debates relating to migration and development (Crush, 2013). Proponents argue that migrant remittances alleviate unemployment, poverty and hunger in sending countries. Indeed, some articles in this special issue have linked migration to improved food security among remittance-receiving households (e.g. Thomas-Hope, this issue). However, other articles demonstrate a more ambiguous relationship between migration and food security (Atuoye et al.; Carney; Crush & Tawodzera, this issue).

In this article, we contribute to the collective discussion by assessing the extent to which Canada's temporary farm labour migration schemes, primarily the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), shape food insecurity and development in migrants' countries of origin and in Canada. We provide preliminary insights and an agenda for future research on the intersection between temporary farm labour migration regimes in Canada and food security. In so doing, we build on the findings of scholars who have critiqued government-managed 'temporary' labour

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migration schemes, such as the SAWP, for perpetuating a policy of cheap food that undermines livelihoods for farmers and farm workers alike, and that normalizes ‘unfree’ labour migration (Preibisch & Otero, 2014; Weiler et al., 2016b). This article reports on prominent claims that Canada’s food security depends on maintaining the status quo for migrant workers. We suggest a critical appraisal of this claim, underscoring the absence of data quantifying how much migrant workers contribute to food produced and consumed domestically, and the prevalence of migrants in export-oriented commodity industries. Pitting food security for Canadians against migrant rights is a false moral choice. Our fieldwork suggests the SAWP provides migrant households with increased food access, but at a high cost. Even if the SAWP may provide temporary improvements in food security, it simultaneously obscures and fails to meaningfully address the structural roots of migrant poverty. Our preliminary evidence suggests the SAWP may provide temporary improvements in food security, but it does not ultimately strengthen food sovereignty for migrant participants. Whereas food security typically emphasizes access to sufficient quantities of food, food *sovereignty* involves the power of affected people to ensure that food-related policies are appropriate to the social and ecological jurisdictions in which they are brought to bear (Desmarais and Wittman, 2014); in migrant workers’ case, both in countries of origin and in Canada.

Beginning with a brief history of farm labour migration schemes in Canada, we sketch out dominant narratives regarding national food security and major debates on the role of migrant remittances in promoting ‘development’. In reviewing related data on farm worker food insecurity in the United States, we underscore the relevance of this article to broader theoretical questions regarding food security and food sovereignty. Next, we critically assess the justification of farm labour migration as key to *Canadian* food security. We examine the extent to which remittances alleviate poverty in migrant sending communities and describe the barriers to healthy food access for farm workers while in Canada. Our conclusion proposes future research directions and an agenda for policy change toward more dignified livelihood alternatives based on farm workers’ self-determination.

Our analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with farm workers (150+), farm employers, government and industry representatives (25+), and migrant advocates/unions (40+) conducted between 2006 and 2015 in Ontario (Weiler and McLaughlin) and British Columbia (BC) (Weiler). In 2015, employers in these provinces hired the largest and second-largest number of SAWP workers in Canada (ESDC, 2016). Additional sources include three years of ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation and in-depth qualitative interviews) with SAWP workers and their families in Canada, Mexico and Jamaica (McLaughlin), clinical data from chart reviews of visits to the emergency department of a rural Ontario hospital (888 visits, Norfolk General Hospital 2006-2009), and practitioner experience in providing community-based occupational health services to migrant farm workers (2005-present, McLaughlin and Cole). While access to culturally relevant foods may have improved in some Canadian communities since our fieldwork began, the SAWP has changed little, perpetuating the conditions of migrant farm workers that lead to food insecurity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History and status of migrant farm workers in Canada

Dating back to the nineteenth century, the Canadian state has enabled international farm labour migration initiatives considered ‘unfree’ (Satzewich, 1991). Governments justified these initiatives based on apparent labour shortages, which broadly coincided with rural-urban migration trends that reduced the availability of local and family labour. Reid-Musson’s (2014) archival research

demonstrates that so-called transient Canadian farm workers enjoyed relative freedom of mobility, which gave them the power to choose their employers. She uncovered historical newspaper depictions of these transient workers as undeserving and unreliable, and such portrayals bolstered employer demands for access to non-Canadian workers who would consent to the wages and working conditions on offer.

After years of farmer lobbying, in 1966 the Canadian government acquiesced and established a pilot migrant farm worker program with Jamaica (Satzewich, 1991). The SAWP grew steadily (264 workers in 1966 to approximately 40,000 workers in 2015¹), expanding to all ten Canadian provinces (ESDC, 2016) and to other Commonwealth Caribbean nations and Mexico. The SAWP is managed through bilateral agreements between the Canadian federal government and sending-country governments, whose consulates are theoretically responsible for ensuring migrants' rights. Workers' temporary visas (six weeks to eight months annually) are 'tied' to their individual employer, who can consult with a sending-country representative and arrange the SAWP worker's repatriation at any time and for any "sufficient reason" (ESDC, 2015:5). In the early 2000s, the federal government introduced additional agricultural streams under the umbrella Temporary Foreign Worker Program with no restriction on sending country. Approximately 11,600 agricultural worker positions were approved in 2015 under these other schemes. (ESDC, 2016). Migrant farm workers are employed in a wide range of cropping systems, including greenhouses, orchards, and mixed horticultural operations. SAWP workers often describe feeling under surveillance in employer-provided housing, with quality ranging from very comfortable to overcrowded and under-equipped (McLaughlin, 2009). 'Low-skilled' migrant farm workers have no formal route to permanent residency/citizenship.

Surprisingly little research has explored linkages between policies on Canadian immigration, agriculture and food security (Preibisch, 2007). From an international perspective, SAWP migrants are working in conditions that often breach International Labour Organization criteria for decent work (ILO, 2012). The concept of decent work itself has been recognized as a key dimension of the right to food and nutrition (RTFN, 2013). Assessing Canada's progress on the right to food, UN Special Rapporteur Olivier De Schutter (2012:8) concluded: "In short, a marginalized category has been created essentially in order to compensate for the increased concentration in the farming sector and for the failure to ensure that farming remains attractive to Canadians." While the linkage between Canadian policies on immigration and labour has been well-explored, how are immigration regimes tied to ideological claims about national food security and agrarianism? What evidence exists to support such claims?

Protecting domestic food security, or agribusiness?

When nationalist sentiments are summoned to support local agriculture and food security, a more complex picture gets obscured. In 2009, the Canadian Produce Marketing Association estimated that Canada imports approximately 80 per cent of its fresh fruits and vegetables (cited in Holley, 2011:139). Many of the crops in which migrant farm workers are employed such as tomatoes and blueberries are significant export commodities (StatCan, 2014a; 2014b). In 2015, Canada's Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food was given an explicit mandate to "Develop a food policy that promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high-quality food, produced by Canadian ranchers and farmers, on the tables of families across the country" (Prime Minister of Canada, 2015). Yet food produced in Canada is not necessarily grown by 'Canadians', nor does it necessarily arrive in Canadian kitchens.

Influential proponents of migrant farm labour regimes have insisted that food security for people in Canada hinges on the international competitiveness of the country's agriculture industry, and that the industry can only remain competitive by hiring unfree non-citizen workers. An industry article discussing the use of SAWP workers in Canada concludes: "Whole sectors of the agriculture

industry in both Canada and the U.S. depend on foreign workers ... for their labor needs. Most horticulture operations would be forced out of business without them" (McClinton, 2015). The Conference Board of Canada, a national think tank, likewise contends that due to regional and international competition, improving migrant farm worker wages could undercut farmers' profits, reduce the availability of local food, and necessitate increased food imports (Burt & Meyer-Robinson, 2016:13). To evaluate claims about the role of migrant farm workers in 'feeding Canadians', researchers would need to quantify the extent to which migrant farm workers' labour underpins the production of food that is consumed domestically, or destined for export.

The insistence that Canadian agriculture can only survive with continued access to unfree migrant farm labour appeals to a much older ideology of "agrarian exceptionalism", which proposes that agriculture is a special industry because it meets the vital human need for food (Hennebry and McLaughlin, 2012). Lobby groups in Canada, the United States and the European Union have successfully mobilized this idea to ensure public support for crop subsidies to support the industry's economic viability, along with legislative exemptions such as environmental and labour standards (Skogstad, 1998). Whether food grown by migrant workers is for domestic or export markets, the ideology of exceptionalism supports profits for agrifood businesses (Preibisch, 2007).

Agrarian exceptionalism is entangled with the popular imaginary of Canada as a land of agricultural abundance. This imaginary undercuts the recognition of settler-colonial structural violence, along with significant food insecurity within the country's borders (Wakefield et al., 2015). Canada adopted the following definition of food security at the World Food Summit: "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 1996). Food insecurity, by contrast, entails a lack of secure access to sufficient food through dignified means due to a restricted income. Approximately 12 per cent of Canadian households in 2014 experienced some level of food insecurity (Tarasuk et al., 2016), not from an absolute shortage of food but from an unequal distribution of food and income. The ongoing legacy of settler-colonialism forms a critical dimension of food insecurity for Indigenous peoples in Canada (Daschuk, 2013).

Depicting food insecurity and hunger as predominantly a problem outside of Canadian borders bolsters the idea of Canada 'feeding the world' with exports from its abundant lands. In this vein, the Conference Board of Canada has linked Canada's migrant farm worker program with the problem of world hunger:

... without TFWs [Temporary Foreign Workers] we may face the prospect of a significant portion of Canada's arable land lying fallow. That would be a tragedy in a world where about 800 million people are food-insecure.

(Burt & Meyer-Robinson, 2016:19)

This statement implies that global hunger is primarily an issue of agricultural productivity, supply, and demand. Thus, it aligns with dominant, technocratic approaches to food security and neoliberal policy regimes advocating international 'trade and aid' (Jarosz, 2014; Otero et al., 2013). By contrast, proponents of food sovereignty (and, often, food justice and *community* food security) describe hunger as arising from political and economic processes of capitalist enclosure, resource alienation, and dispossession (ibid, p. 174). While food security and food sovereignty have been taken up in distinct and sometimes oppositional ways, we find value in Jarosz's (2014) suggestion to reframe the two discourses as relational rather than diametrically opposed.

Factors shaping food insecurity for farm workers in Canada and the United States

Studies in multiple U.S. regions indicate significantly greater food insecurity among migrant and seasonal farm workers compared to the general population. Farm worker food insecurity in the

U.S.-Mexico border region appears to be particularly high, with 82% of 100 sampled farm workers in Texas and New Mexico exhibiting food insecurity, including 49% food insecure with hunger (Weigel et al., 2007). The micro-level factors that shape farm worker food insecurity in the United States are similar to those affecting migrant agricultural workers in Canada. These include a low income, long working hours, living in rural areas with limited access to transportation, and inadequate food preparation and storage space (Hill et al., 2011; Quandt et al., 2014). These factors can lead farm workers to adopt diets focused on lower-cost, energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods that are less prone to spoilage than fresh produce and more readily available in a new cultural context (Cason et al., 2006). Food insecurity in migrant and seasonal farm worker households can generate and exacerbate other health issues, such as overweight, obesity and diabetes, and negative mental health outcomes (Kiehne and Mendoza, 2015; Kilanowski, 2012; Weigel et al., 2007).

At the level of political economy, farm-worker food insecurity in Canada and the United States is intimately related to policies governing labour, immigration, and trade. Economic liberalization processes such as the North American Free Trade Agreement caused large amounts of subsidized U.S. corn to pour into Mexico and pushed many former small-scale Mexican farmers into the migration stream (Jarosz, 2014). The combined effects of neoliberal immigration policies, employment laws and free trade agreements can be understood as a form of racialized structural violence (Farmer, 2001) against (im)migrants from the Global South. That is, these structures establish unequal access to goods and services and place migrant farm workers at a high risk of bodily harm (Holmes, 2013).

Food security researchers and advocates have proposed solutions to advance farm worker food security that range from individual-level intervention to state-level change and systemic transformation. The emphasis people place on each type of solution reflects distinct understandings of the fundamental causes of farm worker food insecurity, who is responsible for addressing it, and factors amenable to control. For instance, some propose expanding food banks to remote rural areas and educating farm workers on their eligibility for food stamps (Wadsworth et al., 2016). Others argue that food assistance programs ought to invest greater efforts into ending racialized exploitation, advancing fair remuneration and benefits, and revamping the immigration system (Minkoff-Zern, 2014).

The tension between food insecurity interventions at various levels raises broader questions about the boundaries of power and accountability, which are reflected in debates in food security and food sovereignty literature on the politics of scale. As Edelman (2014) asks, who is the sovereign in food sovereignty – the nation-state, the region, a locale, or ‘the people’? What ought to be the scope of sovereign power in an increasingly globalized food system? Consider for instance, the national level; if nation-states are partly responsible for generating the structural violence that shapes migrant hunger and poverty, then strengthening the capacity of state institutions to enact food security or food sovereignty rights and regulations may offer questionable benefits for people categorized as non-citizens. Our paper illuminates the implications of pitting food security for members of the sovereign national body against the bodies of those who are deemed non-members.

Remittances and development debate

Migration can be seen largely as resulting from “imbalances in development, but also as influencing development” (Nyberg-Sørensen et al., 2002:4). Some point to remittances as a solution to such imbalances. The World Bank reports remittances “significantly reduce the level, depth, and severity of poverty in the developing world” (Adams and Page, 2005:1645). As such, labour migration programs like the SAWP are often viewed as development initiatives. The two leading participating countries in the SAWP – Mexico and Jamaica – both rely heavily on migrant

remittances to support their poor and largely rural populations. Jamaica has a legacy of economic collapse, structural adjustment, and being subject to predatory pricing by wealthier nations. Together, these conditions of structural violence have left the country with a public debt of 123.6 per cent of GDP – the fourth highest per capita in the world (CIA, 2013). Jamaican remittances of \$2 billion constitute 14 per cent of its GDP (Wells et al., 2014). Meanwhile, approximately 9.8 per cent of Mexico’s population was living in extreme poverty in 2012 (CONEVAL, 2013:1;15), and 23.3 per cent of the population experienced deprivation due to a lack of access to food. Mexico ranks fourth in the world for receipt of remittances (\$22 billion), and SAWP remittances totalled CAD \$174.1 million in 2012, with the average worker remitting nearly CAD \$10,000 (Wells et al. 2014).

The extent to which labour migration is a meaningful form of development remains an ongoing debate (Kapur, 2004; Massey et al., 1994). Kapur (2004) argues while remittances may address transient poverty, their effects on structural poverty remain uncertain, especially as migrants become increasingly dependent on migration in lieu of local job development and productive investments. While SAWP employment reduces the severity of migrants’ immediate poverty, including their food insecurity, the dependence on extremely precarious employment circumstances is persistent (Binford, 2013; Wells et al., 2014).

MIGRANTS SUPPORTING CANADIAN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY

Although initially characterized as a stopgap measure required under a ‘state of exception’, temporary labour migration has now become the norm (Agamben, 2005; CIC, 2015; Henneby and McLaughlin, 2012; McLaughlin, 2009). Many of the farm employers we interviewed assert their businesses and the Canadian agriculture industry at large could not survive without migrant farm workers. As one grower articulated: “We’re to a point now, really, where it would cripple [sic] agriculture to remove the [SAWP] program.” (Interview with farmer, British Columbia, Canada, 2013, Weiler). Similarly, a grower in Ontario’s Niagara region expressed the following of SAWP workers: “They’re the backbone. I would say most farmers . . . could not survive without bringing those workers over here” (Interview with farmer, Ontario, Canada, 2007, McLaughlin).

SAWP employers recount paying more for inputs such as fertilizers without a commensurate increase in the prices they are paid for food products. This ‘cost-price squeeze’ occurs alongside intensified competition from countries like Mexico and the United States, which may have lower labour costs and more favourable growing conditions. The same BC grower quoted above asserted that Canadians are less productive than SAWP workers; they are unwilling to accept low farm worker wages, and consumers would be likewise unwilling to pay for costlier food associated with higher farm worker wages. One Ontario grower who represents a SAWP employer non-profit expressed that, despite these pressures, “I think we have an obligation as a country and a province to produce *some* of the food here.” He reasoned that Canada could not necessarily continue its heavy reliance on importing produce from California because of potential food shortages. The grower drew linkages between fresh produce availability, labour costs, and pressure from food retailers to keep food prices low due to foreign competition.

On my little road, within four miles, we’ve lost 2500 acres of horticultural crops . . . in the last 20 years. It’s all *grain* now. If all you want to eat is corn flakes, that’s wonderful, but you know, it doesn’t take much labour to grow grain It takes a lot of people to do that [horticultural crops], it’s all hand-picked stuff. And the margins are very tight, because we do not set prices. We’re *told* by the major chains.

(Interview with farmer, Ontario, Canada, 2015, Weiler)

Such accounts present unfree migrant workers as the unassailable solution to sustain Canadian food security and rural life.

FOOD INSECURITY AS A DRIVER OF MIGRATION AND THE ROLE OF REMITTANCES

The entire village was built up by migrants, and previously people lived in a much greater state of poverty, but now all of the houses you see were either made by Canadian or American migrants. [Before we had] nothing, just tin shacks and absolute poverty. We all slept in one room. We had no shoes. It was really hard. We just ate beans and soup.

(Interview with migrant worker, Mexico, 2006, McLaughlin)

Poverty and food insecurity are central drivers of migrants' desire to work abroad. Food insecurity for small farmers in countries like Mexico and Jamaica often relates to their historical position of inequality within their own countries and globally, stemming from systems of colonialism and in some cases slavery. Historical inequities have been worsened by recent international agricultural and trade policies that favour large producers and economically dominant countries at the expense of small producers and poorer countries.

Most of Mexico's seven million-person farm remunerated labour force (excluding farm owners and non-compensated family members) are *jornaleros* (day workers) who lack regular employment (INEGI, 2014). The real wages for these and other workers dropped substantially in the wake of Structural Adjustment Policies (Basok, 2002:92-95). The teenage son of a migrant worker articulated why local agricultural livelihoods are insufficient:

I work in the field, on my grandfather's land When we work, we earn about 20,000 [pesos – or \$2,000] in the year, all of us working, my uncle, my brother, me, we work little by little. That money is not enough for the expenses; we don't live off the land. It's not enough to live here, with all of us working.

(Interview with son of migrant worker, 2006, Mexico, McLaughlin)

The need for migration has only become more urgent in the eyes of many Mexican families. A Mexican village leader explained:

It is necessary for every family here to have someone who migrates in order to survive We used to be able to live off of the land, but not anymore. . . . All prices have increased, and the prices of food grown in the *campo* [field] haven't changed, so . . . we can buy less with our money. So for what we produce we can get very little money, but what we need to buy is very expensive. In every family at least one person must go; in many families many members must go.

(Interview with Mexican village leader and former migrant, Mexico, 2006, McLaughlin)

In Jamaica, land distribution is extremely skewed with large, fertile holdings allocated to sugar and banana plantations, leaving peasant farmers to make do on small, mountainous plots (Russell, 2003). Jamaican interview participants noted similar concerns to their Mexican counterparts, generally being unable to support their families with subsistence farming.

The SAWP selection system favours poor rural residents who have experience working in agriculture and dependents to support (McLaughlin, 2010). Surveys conducted with workers and their families have found people primarily use remittances to provide for basic family needs, such as educating children, build and improve homes, maintain the basics of life (food, clothing, etc.), and cover medical expenses (Binford, 2013; Hennebry, 2006; McLaughlin, 2009; Wells et al. 2014). With migrant incomes, most families diversify their diets, include more nutritious food, and

purchase food with greater regularity, thus reducing or eliminating their previously experienced periods of hunger or malnutrition (McLaughlin, 2009; Wells et al., 2014).

However, because SAWP contracts are temporary, inconsistent and unpredictable, any gains in food security are precarious. If remittance funds are spent prior to the next contract, if a SAWP worker is not invited to return to Canada, or if they cannot return due to health or personal issues, the loss of a job in Canada often means the loss of a migrant family's ability to cover its basic expenses, including food purchases (Binford, 2013; Hennebray, 2006; McLaughlin, 2009; Wells et al., 2014). Migrants are effectively excluded from social support programs designed to protect workers in Canada. Despite fully contributing to Canadian Employment Insurance (EI), program criteria (e.g. residence in Canada) render SAWP workers ineligible for benefits, including special EI benefits such as parental leave (UFCW, 2014). Farming is dangerous, so every year, a subset of workers experience long-term illnesses or injuries that prevent them from returning to manual labour (McLaughlin, 2009). Over a ten-year period, at least 787 SAWP workers in Ontario were prematurely deported for medical reasons (4.62 repatriations per 1,000 workers) (Orkin et al., 2014). As there is no long-term income support available to these workers, and as some are unable to return to the workforce, their food security may actually be threatened due to their participation in the SAWP.

HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS AMONG MIGRANTS IN CANADA

Food access

Because many, if not most SAWP workers come from farming backgrounds, access to fresh subsistence crops for consumption may be easier in countries of origin than in Canada. Most workers in McLaughlin's (2009) interviews felt that, in comparison to their experiences at home, they lack a nutritious diet in Canada. As one Jamaican worker explained:

... We're used to Jamaican fertilizer food, that you grow every couple days or weeks. You can get good food [in Canada], but the money is too much. They import yam, banana from Jamaica, but we don't have the money to buy it, or buy much. We usually eat rice and peas, fried chicken, salt fish, dumpling, maybe if we see something Jamaican, like pumpkin or banana, we buy it.

(Interview, Jamaican migrant worker, Jamaica, 2007, McLaughlin)

A Mexican worker noted similar concerns:

For example, there are no *nopales* [cactus] to make you a smoothie. ... They are liquefied, natural and very healthy because they have many vitamins, and in Canada there's nothing like that. And ... everything has more chemicals than here [Mexico], here everything is more natural. But obviously, we don't just stop eating, we brought ourselves our tortillas and all that we can, we make *tamales* and *pozole*.

(Interview with female Mexican migrant worker, Mexico, 2006, McLaughlin)

Many workers stuff their suitcases with familiar items from home, but these only last so long. Most employers only take workers shopping once a week, and workers generally cannot make mid-week trips to the grocery store to stock up on fresh items due to time constraints and a lack of vehicle access.

Inadequate food storage and refrigeration space is another major impediment to healthy eating. It is common for entire houses of workers to share just one fridge, with each resident designated only a small part of the shelf-space. In one instance, a worker ended up hospitalized for days

due to food poisoning. Because of insufficient fridge space, he had stored his cooked chicken meal in a cupboard and consumed it for several days. With insufficient fridge space for an entire week's worth of groceries, workers rely on more heavily processed foods with longer shelf-lives without refrigeration. Junk foods like chips, cookies, and pop are common items in their kitchens.

The long hours of work also contribute to a poor diet. One worker explained: "We drink Coke to help us stay awake." With limited kitchen facilities shared among many workers, and with everyone wanting to cook at the end of a long day, fast meals are a priority. Many workers are simply unable to cook and eat sufficiently, especially during busy periods. As one advocate observed:

The guys have to be so organized around their cooking. They get off late from work and only have one stove, so they can't all use it, so some of them have to cook the night before to make sure they can eat.

(Interview with Canadian migrant volunteer, Ontario, Canada, 2007, McLaughlin)

Invariably, the quality of what they can prepare under such conditions is compromised. Jamaican workers rely heavily on fried chicken and rice, while their Mexican counterparts consume mainly tortillas, rice, beans and chicken. On nights out, workers often frequent fast food and buffet restaurants. Fresh fruits and vegetables are often lacking in their diets.

In addition, many men expressed that they cannot eat well because they "don't know how to cook," and that the gender norm in their specific home countries is for women to cook. When one worker was asked if his diet was nutritious in Canada, he put it bluntly, as if the answer was obvious: "No, because I didn't have a wife to cook!" Many migrant men indicated they had never thought about how to cook and prepare a healthy meal before coming to Canada. As one explained:

There you arrive; you don't know how to cook or wash or anything. It's very difficult. We can't find a woman to do these things. I have to cook, wash, iron, everything. There is no help. There I learned that the work of a woman is . . . a lot of work.

(Interview with Mexican migrant worker, Ontario, Canada, 2007, McLaughlin)

Some positive practices have emerged to address these challenges. Farm employers who are more sensitive to migrant worker food needs provide small garden plots for growing vegetables, and some share farm produce with employees. Employers at larger operations sometimes pay one of the workers to cook for the others, providing workers with healthy, culturally appropriate meals from a more experienced cook. Some local immigrant entrepreneurs have generated informal businesses selling culturally familiar 'home-cooked' meals to workers. Repeat workers often learn how to cook by watching their peers; cooking familiarity is likely to improve with time in Canada. A few employers and community health centres have provided nutrition lessons and cooking classes to small groups of workers. While limited in their reach, such practices hold potential for healthier food access.

Health problems associated with food insecurity

Women workers generally expressed greater confidence in their ability to cook and provide healthy meals for themselves, often coordinating and sharing duties. Nonetheless, they still reported many problems with nutrition, some of which they attributed to emotional stress. "When I get nervous I want to eat. I get this because of tough work, missing Mexico, and problems in house," remarked Patricia, a clinically overweight Mexican worker who gained over ten kilos in Canada. On the converse, Marcia, another Mexican woman, described losing seven kilos during her first season in Canada. She suffered from depression about separation from her child. Marcia

suggested weight loss is commonplace among her female co-workers: “All of us lose weight . . . , because we work a lot and we don’t eat what we should eat” (Interviews with Mexican workers, 2007, Ontario, McLaughlin). Among McLaughlin’s (2009) interviewees, many reported either gaining or losing weight in Canada – they generally estimated a 3-10 kilo difference over a season.

In our (McLaughlin and Cole) clinical work with men and women migrant farm workers at community health centres and occupational health clinics in Ontario (Mayell et al., 2015), we have recurrently noted issues of dietary inadequacy. The physical demands of migrants’ work mean many of them consume more carbohydrates and fats to meet the energy requirements of their jobs. Skilled farm vehicle drivers who expend less energy but eat similarly are often overweight. Male workers report that long working hours – often 10-14 hrs/day (McLaughlin 2009) – prevent them from engaging in sports as often as in their home countries, exacerbating their weight gains. Limited fruit and vegetable intake, combined with large fluid requirements, given the outdoors weather conditions in the summer, are associated with a range of gastrointestinal distress – acid reflux, constipation, and associated haemorrhoids.

In the chart review of emergency room visits to a hospital located in one of the centres of migrant employment, we found 14 per cent of visits were for gastro-intestinal problems, second only to injury or trauma. A similar pattern was observed among migrants repatriated for medical reasons between 2001-2011: 86/787 (11%) were for digestive or gastroenterological diagnoses (Orkin et al., 2014), the second highest category.

RESEARCH AND POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Research

We have drawn attention to some of the principal dynamics shaping migrant farm workers’ experiences of food insecurity in both sending and receiving countries. However, key knowledge gaps remain in terms of both updating and extending our preliminary findings. Future research should include a standardized measurement of household food insecurity for migrant workers and longitudinal tracking over several employment cycles both in workers’ country of origin and in Canada. An in-depth understanding of migrants’ skills, knowledge and values around food preparation, preservation and household-level production would also help with identifying how to better support farm workers’ existing food security assets. Comparative research with migrant farm workers in other countries (e.g. the United States, Spain, and New Zealand), including both undocumented workers and those hired through government-facilitated programs, could elucidate how variables such as workers’ immigration status impact their food security.

Policy

Even in the absence of such data, our research points to several potential policy interventions to strengthen food security, health and dignity for migrant workers both in Canada and their countries of origin. We propose three interrelated areas for policy intervention, which encompass shorter- and longer-term projects: (1) Promoting household food security for farm workers in Canada; (2) Supporting more dignified livelihood alternatives and immigration pathways; and (3) Strengthening food sovereignty in Canada and workers’ sending countries. These preliminary recommendations are based on our review of the literature and interviews with migrants and migrant advocates; to ensure their relevance and efficacy, these proposals should be carefully vetted with migrant farm workers themselves.

(1) Promoting household food security for farm workers in Canada

Some community and migrant health advocates (Basok, 2009) have suggested that providing farm workers with access to community gardens or individual plots in Canada could promote food security by enabling migrants to grow some of their own fresh food and sustain their cultural foodways. In addition to providing plots of land, more employers could share site-grown fresh, healthy food. Employers can also prevent issues such as food poisoning by ensuring adequate time and space to store and prepare foods. In addition, public health officials can play a more active role in ensuring employer compliance with minimum housing standards through random spot-checks, and improving guidelines for food storage and preparation facilities.

Canadian public health institutions and employers can build on existing efforts to support farm workers who wish to improve their knowledge of food preparation, nutrition and food safety by providing resources for community kitchens. These hands-on classes could be led by co-ethnic farm workers and might involve distributing free tools such as slow cookers to help farm workers navigate limited kitchen resources. More broadly, a committee with multiple stakeholders implicated in migrant farm workers' health care and work-related compensation throughout workers' transnational journeys could help to reduce their vulnerability to exacerbated food insecurity in the event of work-related illness or injury (see McLaughlin et al. 2014a; 2014b).

(2) Supporting more dignified livelihood alternatives and immigration pathways

One potential route to better food access would be for migrant farm workers to become farmers in Canada. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of farm operators in Canada decreased by 24.8 per cent, and the average age of farmers rose from 47.5 to 54 (Beaulieu, 2015). While some young Canadians are entering into ecologically-oriented agriculture, these disproportionately white new farmers often lack farming skills and experience (Dennis, 2015). By contrast, migrants lacking the same racial and citizenship privilege often have extensive agricultural experience both in Canada and sending countries. Based on our fieldwork with migrants and advocates, many migrant farm workers have expressed an interest in immigrating to Canada and continuing in agriculture. However, the Canadian state has not yet afforded them this opportunity. Likewise, campaigns to promote access to markets, capital and farmland for aspiring farmers have not extended to migrant farm workers.

Some migrant advocates have proposed farm worker-owned agricultural co-ops as a way for farm workers to pursue farming in Canada using profit-sharing mechanisms and engaging in farm labour on their own terms (Weiler et al., 2016a:8-9). Such enterprises would be more viable if migrant farm workers had, as most migrant rights organizations in Canada have called for, landed status upon arrival through a federal government mandate.

Advocates have also proposed Canadian civil society organizations could help to address some of the contexts of exit leading people to migrate in the first place. This might involve, for instance, helping to raise seed money for projects led by members of migrant sending-communities to promote local livelihood development, reduce poverty and strengthen food security. Developing longer-term livelihood solutions based on migrant workers' self-determination – with migrant labour as just one option among a suite of viable, dignified income-generating activities – would help to reduce the precariousness of depending on remittances for income and strengthen food security in country of origin.

(3) Strengthening food sovereignty in Canada and workers' sending countries

Noting the central issue of unequal distribution of food and income shaping food insecurity in Canada, some food security researchers have suggested exploring a guaranteed annual income

(Emery et al., 2013). Rather than simply placing the burden of higher farm worker wages on individual farmers or consumers, a guaranteed annual income could ensure societal support for both farmers and farm workers based on the recognition of food security and ecologically sound agriculture as public goods.

Grower associations have invested extensive resources into lobbying for the continuation and expansion of unfree temporary migrant labour regimes as though there is no alternative. Rather, growers might collectively challenge policy regimes and free trade agreements privileging the growth of near-monopolies on food by multinational companies. These include agribusiness corporations that determine the cost of inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides and seeds, along with increasingly concentrated food processors and retailers wielding disproportionate power over food prices (Clapp and Fuchs, 2009). Indeed, a small but vocal movement in Canada has advocated not only for food security, but food sovereignty, which involves the power of affected people to ensure food, agriculture and trade policies are appropriate to the specific social and ecological contexts they impact (Desmarais and Wittman, 2014). This movement is linked to international food sovereignty efforts including alliances with both farmers and farm workers (Via Campesina, 2015; Weiler et al., 2015). Our study points to two key challenges for future food sovereignty efforts: First, developing a version of ‘the sovereign’ that includes non-citizen migrant workers and their families. Second, developing democratic political institutions with regulatory mechanisms to enforce collective rights for migrants amidst their transnational lives and livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have aimed to initiate a long overdue discussion about how research and policy directions could promote both food security and sovereignty for Canadian residents and migrant workers alike. By scrutinizing how ideological claims about food security for the nation-state justify labour-migration regimes, we have drawn attention to several paradoxes. Farm workers produce fresh fruits and vegetables, and yet they often lack access to healthy, affordable food. Canada presents itself as a land of abundance, but significant food insecurity exists within its borders. Canada imports most of its fresh food, but it hires migrant workers for export-oriented crops. We offer a range of preliminary research and policy suggestions to begin resolving these paradoxes. In addition, our article contributes to theoretical debates on whose food security is ensured through national projects of food security, and who counts as the sovereign in food sovereignty.

NOTE

- 1 These figures are a rough approximation of the number of total number of workers, and they represent only the number of approved Labour Market Impact Assessments.

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