

**Martin, Philip. 2021. *The Prosperity Paradox: Fewer and More Vulnerable Farm Workers*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780198867845**  
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Most of the world's workers were employed in agriculture until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when economic development in industrial countries pushed and pulled farmers and farm workers into nonfarm jobs, where wages are higher and most jobs offer benefits that range from health insurance to pensions.

Agriculture remains a major employer, employing 884 million or 27 percent of the world's 3.3 billion workers, including over half in many developing countries. All countries with more than 50 percent of their workers employed in agriculture are poor, and all countries with fewer than five percent of their workers employed in agriculture are rich.

The share of workers employed in agriculture falls as per capita incomes rise. *The Prosperity Paradox* highlights the fact that shrinking farm workforces include a higher share of hired workers who are more vulnerable than ever before.

There are three reasons for agriculture's increasing reliance on vulnerable farm workers. First, as agricultural employment declines, hired workers become more important on the fewer and larger farms that account for most farm production. Second, most farm workers are employed seasonally at relatively low wages. Earning half as much per hour as nonfarm workers, and working half as many hours a year, gives seasonal farm workers a quarter of average annual nonfarm earnings.

Third, hired farm workers include local workers who have difficulty finding nonfarm jobs and immigrant workers without other job options. Farm worker vulnerability is compounded by the growing role of labor contractors and other nonfarm intermediaries. A third of all workers on US crop farms, and over half in California, are brought there by nonfarm employers rather than hired directly.

*The Prosperity Paradox* explains how farm workers are becoming more important and more vulnerable in US agriculture. ILO standards, labor laws, and unions set aspirational goals to protect farm workers that are not fulfilled in practice. New approaches to farm worker protection, such as fair-trade certification and buyers who require their suppliers to have their labor practices audited, have limited footprints.

*The Prosperity Paradox* concludes that investigation and audit approaches to protecting farm workers fails to guarantee continuous or motion-picture compliance with labor laws. The best models for continuous protection can be borrowed from food safety and workers compensation. Externalities, as when spinach tainted by E Coli reduces demand and prices for all spinach growers, provides to cooperate to implement effective food safety programs. Workers compensation adjusts employer premiums to reflect worker injuries, prompting private insurers to help employers to maintain safe workplaces.

This blog summarizes the major themes of the three-part and seven-chapter book. The major conclusion is that farm labor problems do not “solve themselves,” and that protections for ever more vulnerable farm workers could be enhanced by private sector initiatives to supplement government efforts.

Farm Labor. The two chapters of Part 1 explain how the concentration of agricultural production on fewer and larger farms leads to more reliance on hired workers and less dependence on farmers and their family members to do farm work.

Government policies subsidize the relatively few farmers in rich countries and tax the many farmers in poor countries. Agricultural policies in rich countries offer price guarantees or payments to preserve family farms that result in higher average incomes and more wealth for farm than for nonfarm families. Such policies also generate inequalities within agriculture, as the largest farms reap most of the subsidies.

Agricultural policies in developing countries often tax farmers to keep food prices low for urban consumers by limiting who can buy farm commodities, allowing buyers to offer farmers below-world market prices. Some governments grant licenses to importers of fertilizers, seed and equipment who mark up the cost of these inputs. Farm families in poor countries have lower than average incomes and wealth, which spurs rural-urban migration.

The 1979 Nobel prize in economics went to two economists with opposite prescriptions for agriculture in developing countries. W. Arthur Lewis advised governments to treat agriculture as a source of labor for the modern manufacturing sector, allowing rural-urban migration to move workers from less productive rural to more productive urban jobs. Theodore Schultz urged governments to invest in rural education to help to modernize and raise productivity in agriculture and to ensure that educated rural residents who migrate to cities can get good jobs.

Farm Workers. The three chapters of Part 2 explain the evolution and characteristics of seasonal farm workers in the US, Mexico, and other countries. In the 1800s, the US relied on large farm families in northeastern subsistence agriculture, slaves in the southeast, and waves of immigrants in the west to be seasonal farm workers.

Today, two-thirds of US hired farm workers were born in Mexico, and almost half are unauthorized. The slowdown in Mexico-US migration since the 2008-09 recession prompted large farms that produce fruits and vegetables to engage in 4-S strategies to get farm work done, satisfy current farm workers to retain them, stretch them with productivity increasing aids such as conveyor belts in the fields, substitute machines for workers where possible, and supplement current workforces with legal guest workers.

The US imports over half of the fresh fruit and a third of the fresh vegetables available. Mexico provides half of the imported fresh fruit and three fourths of the fresh vegetable imports, and Mexican workers in Mexican agriculture are substituting for Mexican workers in US agriculture. Mexican farm exporters are using greenhouses and other protective structures to extend the season during which they can export fruits and vegetables, encouraging south to north internal migration within Mexico and drawing complaints from US growers of commodities from blueberries to tomatoes.

Other countries also struggle with seasonal farm worker issues. Canada has several programs to admit farm guest workers, while EU countries from Britain to Germany, and from Spain to Italy, rely on migrants from Eastern European member states to fill seasonal farm jobs. Poles and Romanians in Western European fields, orchards, and vineyards are joined by Africans and others in labor markets that range from relatively well organized in some countries to rife with exploitation in others.

The island nations of Australia and New Zealand rely on backpacker youth and adult guest workers from Pacific Islands to supplement local seasonal workforces. Australia relies mostly on backpackers who pay for their own transportation and housing and do farm work to qualify for visas that allow them to stay another year and do nonfarm work, while New Zealand relies mostly on six-month guest workers for whom farm employers must share transportation and housing costs.

Brazil is the major farm exporter among developing countries, exporting more chicken, coffee, orange juice, and sugar than any other country. Brazil relied on slaves longer than any other major country, and the export agriculture in the center and south of the country relies on the descendants of slaves who are concentrated in the north and northeast to migrate south to fill seasonal farm jobs. Brazil has a broad definition of slavery, and regularly finds cases of exploitative working conditions among poor Afro-Brazilian migrants with little education.

Protecting Farm Workers. The International Labor Organization aims to protect the rights of all workers, and devotes special attention to farm workers in programs to reduce child labor, protect migrant workers, and counter trafficking in persons. The ILO's core principle is workplace equality. All workers, regardless of migration status, should receive equal wages and treatment in the workplace in order to protect migrants and to protect local workers from unfair competition from migrants.

After very exploitative working conditions were detected that threatened exports of fish and seafood from Thailand, the ILO helped to implement mend-rather-than-end policies to improve protections for migrant workers and to preserve their jobs, rejecting the calls of some NGOs for boycotts that would have reduced worker exploitation and eliminated jobs. One exploited or trafficked worker is one too many, but some NGOs exaggerate to raise attention, and refuse to acknowledge that blocking exports to reduce worker exploitation could leave workers jobless. The ILO takes a pragmatic approach to protect vulnerable migrant workers in agriculture and related industries.

Governments find it difficult to enforce labor laws in agriculture because enforcement agencies rely on complaints, and vulnerable workers do not complain. Unions have been unable to organize and protect farm workers for many reasons, from the exclusion of farm workers from some protective labor laws to the fact that the farm workers who could be union leaders are often the first to find nonfarm jobs.

What are the most promising ways to improve protections for farm workers? Direct purchasing from farmers' markets or community-based farms are likely to remain niches in the food system. Similarly, private labor-certification systems such as fair-trade labels depend on snapshot audits of farms to ensure compliance with labor,

environmental, and other standards, not the motion picture compliance necessary to protect farm workers.

The most promising way to improve protections for farm workers is to borrow from food safety and workers compensation. Growers and buyers have incentives to produce and sell fruits and vegetables that are safe. The safety of US fresh produce was improved after E Coli outbreaks in leafy green vegetables led to the private development of food safety protocols that were eventually incorporated into the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2010. The food safety model creates a motion picture of compliance with regular testing of water, residue, and other indicators of contamination, and uses traceback systems to quickly determine the source of problems.

Similarly, workers compensation charges employers to cover lost wages and rehabilitation for injured workers, giving employers and insurers incentives to maintain safe workplaces. Farm worker protections could be improved with electronic record keeping that facilitates the detection of anomalies and analysis of labor law violation data to detect patterns of non-compliance. Giving produce buyers access to labor data in the same way they have access to food safety data could allow market pressures to punish labor violators and to reward compliant employers.

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CRITICAL FRONTIERS OF THEORY, RESEARCH, AND POLICY  
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