

The Workforce and its Costs – Constraints of Agricultural Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

The subject of the research was workforce, its availability and price, and its importance for agriculture development in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). The aim was to determine whether the workforce remains to be a comparative advantage or has become a limitation on agricultural development in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The introduction to the selected subject of research was done on the basis of a literature review, followed by an authors' own survey based on a randomly selected sample of farms. The results confirmed that it is increasingly difficult to find workers for seasonal works in agriculture in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that farms rely primarily on the workforce within families, relatives and friends. The price of labour in agriculture is rising, but it is still lower than in other sectors and abroad, which is the reason why workers are leaving agriculture. Bosnia and Herzegovina compared to three years ago, it is harder for Bosnia and Herzegovina farms to find additional workforce and they pay it more. The future agricultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina should seriously count on family farms and their modernization in terms of creating conditions for workforce reduction and substitution.

Key words: agriculture, workforce, farming employment, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Introduction

Agricultural production is characterized by an uneven need for workforce, especially in the case of fruit and vegetable production and performing seasonal jobs. Due to the dominance of small farms in B&H, the main workforce consists of farm holders and members of their families, with the need to occasionally hire additional workers. Larger farms have full-time workers, while other sectors in the labour market competing for employment workers from small farms. In this case, the opportunity costs of labour and the tendency of its moving are important. Recently, with the opening of borders in the EU countries for B&H workers, new job opportunities have been created for them to work for higher salary. Pucar and Pepić (2019) state that "because wages are stagnant or even declining, it is no wonder that B&H has a significant outflow of the workforce into Western European countries". In the period 2000-2015, close to a hundred thousand persons from B&H obtained working permits in the EU. Moreover, it is projected that additional 140,000 citizens will do the same in the period 2017-2021 (Pucar, 2017). Unequal need for workforce is conditioned by the practice of sharing agricultural workers with other non-agricultural sectors, either because of underemployment in small farms, or because of uneven needs during the year. As a result of an increase in labour productivity in agriculture and its substitution by other production factors, labour participation in the creation of added value of agriculture, and agribusiness has generally declined.

As a whole, farming employment in the EU has been steadily declining for decades and has fallen from 13.1 million Annual Work Units (AWU) in 2003 to 9.1 million AWU in 2018 across the EU-27, representing an impressive 30% decrease in the last fifteen years (Schuh et al., 2019). In B&H, no equivalent data exist, but for example, according to the Labour Force Survey, 15.7% of the population (about 129 thousand) are employed in agriculture (ASB&H, 2018a). Of these, 79.7% are employed full time, and 20.3% part time. In B&H as well, the number of employees in agriculture has been continuously declining and in the period 2008-2018 it dropped by 30% (ASB&H, 2008, 2018a).

Research of the role of agriculture in the employment of workforce in transitional countries, whether they are EU member countries or are about to join EU, has shown that agriculture is a buffer for employment of surplus of workforce after the collapse of the industrial and service sector. But, at the same time agriculture is a "gold" reserve to satisfy labour needs in other sectors, causing rural-urban and home domicile country-abroad migrations

(Bojnec et al., 2003; Swinnen et al., 2005; Bojnec & Dries, 2005; Bojnec, 2011; Tocco et al., 2014; Mortan et al., 2016; Szuba-Barańska, 2019). However, in addition to efforts to increase the efficiency of agriculture through the production of higher value-added products with less involvement of workforce, the obstacle to increasing or maintaining the existing level of agricultural production may be a shortage of workforce and increase in its price, and thus the total costs of production. In general, the price of labour in the EU, which is the main employer of labour force from non-EU countries, is rising, and this indirectly affects the price of labour in other countries, including B&H.

The labour cost in the EU has been slightly increasing in recent years (5.4% in 3 years). In 2018 average gross labour cost included payments paid by employer was 27.4 EUR/hour at the EU-28 level, with significant variations between member states (EUROSTAT, 2019a). If one looks at the closest EU member states where a large number of B&H migrants are migrating, the average labour cost in Croatia was 10.9 EUR/hour and in Slovenia 18.1 EUR/hour. Certainly, a more serious analysis of the labour cost requires going into details, regarding what that cost includes, how much wages and non-wages cost, as well as income tax, and other payments, which vary from country to country.

In B&H, labour cost data are usually published on a monthly basis. In 2016 the average labour cost per hour in B&H was 10.87 BAM (recalculated 5.56 EUR/hour) (ASB&H, 2018b). Unfortunately, this survey did not separately include labour cost in agriculture. In the Republic of Srpska average net salary in 2018 was 438 EUR, i.e. gross 694 EUR. For the agriculture, in the forestry and fishery sector it was even lower, 373 EUR, and 592 EUR, respectively. Based on average monthly working hours (176), gross labour cost per working hour was 3.36 EUR/hour (RZS RS, 2019), lower than in other sectors or abroad.

Reduction in the number of agricultural workers can have two opposite effects on its efficiency and competitiveness. It usually reduces the number of workers in agriculture, which results in increased labour productivity and a reduction in the participation of labour costs in total costs (Dorward, 2013). At the same time, it can lead to higher gross labour costs because of higher labour unit cost due to less labour supply, especially in the case of inelastic supply due to absence of using migrants' labour force (as e.g. state Taylor & Charlton, 2018).

Previously, the agricultural workforce was poorly qualified, which was limiting its mobility and reducing the opportunity cost of labour. However, each subsequent generation has increased their qualifications (education of children has become a major investment of farmers), so that they increased the opportunity costs of the rural workforce. So, in order to keep the workforce in

agriculture, the price of workforce must be competitive to the price of workforce for the same jobs abroad (if there are no barriers to such labour mobility) and competitive to labour costs in other sectors in which such workforce can be recruited.

Some years ago, the workforce was seen in B&H as a source of growth and development of domestic agriculture ("rural population's willingness to stay in the countryside", "average rural age structure quite favourable", "available and underutilized labour force in the country", "relatively cheap labour") (MAFWM RS, 2009). Hence, it was expected that, due to lower labour costs and surplus of labour force in the countryside, this would be one of the motives for attracting foreign investment and be a source of competitiveness for domestic agricultural production. Also, according to some sources „there are a number of advantages that may attract people to live in rural areas. These include lower housing and living costs, more available space, a less polluted environment and a less stressful lifestyle” (Margaras, 2019, p. 4). Of course, this mainly applies to developed countries and regions, such as the EU, to which the previous quotation refers. However, instead of materializing the advantage of workforce availability as expected, there has recently been an outflow of workers from B&H to neighbouring and EU countries, so that labour shortages have been a limitation to keep the current level of agricultural production, as stated in some recent strategic documents (“lack of labour force (for harvesting and other seasonal jobs) in some regions”; “increasing rural-urban migration, aging rural households and loss of young, educated population”) (MOFTER B&H, 2018).

Material and Methods

The subject of this research is the workforce in B&H agriculture and its cost. The aim of the research is to test the assumption that the workforce has become a constraint on agricultural development in B&H. The research began with a study of literature sources, the key findings of this research presented in the introductory part of the paper. Then, it was continued by collecting additional data from primary sources. Combined on-line and face-to-face interviews with agricultural producers in B&H were conducted. The survey was conducted during March and April 2019. The aim was to survey 100 farms from different parts of B&H, and in the end, 92 questionnaires were validated as suitable for further mathematical and statistical processing. The sample was randomly selected, by random physical distribution or by sending a questionnaire. However, it is not representative considering its size and the total number of farms in B&H.

The collected data were systematized and processed by mathematical-statistical methods, using descriptive statistics methods, structure analysis and calculation of central tendency measures. For most of the questions, standardized responses were predicted according to a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, and in some cases from 1 to 3. The conclusions were obtained by a logical method, linking the results of the authors' own research and others' research findings.

Results and Discussion

The socio-economic structure of the sample of surveyed farms was as shown below (Table 1).

Tab. 1. Socio-economic structure of the sample of surveyed farms (n=92)

1. Dominant production	
Crop production	10.9%
Vegetable production	32.6%
Fruit production	9.8%
Animal husbandry	46.7%
2. Age of farm owner	
< 30 years	8.7%
31-40	21.7%
41-50	33.7%
51-60	23.9%
> 60 years	12.0%
3. Number of family members	4.71
4. Number of working-age members	3.68
5. Work-legal status of a farm holder	
Farmer only	35.9%
Farmer seeking a job	14.1%
Farmer with permanent employment outside the farm	23.9%
Part-time farmer	14.1%
Pensioner	10.9%
6. Annual value of agricultural production	
Less than 5,000 EUR	33.7%
5,000-25,000 EUR	39.1%
25,000-50,000 EUR	18.5%
More than 50,000 EUR	8.7%

Although the selection of respondents was random, labour-intensive productions (vegetable and fruit production and animal husbandry) dominated in the sample, which was desirable from the point of view of the subject of research. The age structure of the respondents was approximately proportionally distributed around the most represented group of ages between 40 and 50, to which a third of the respondents belonged. On average, the surveyed farms had a working contingent of 3.6 working-age members, which means that they could carry out part of the agricultural work by relying solely on family members (min. were 2 and max. 10 working-age members). Considering the value of annual production, farms with an income of up to EUR 25,000 prevailed, which indicates that these are mainly small-scale family farms, which are otherwise dominant in the structure of agricultural production in B&H.

The first set of questions were related to the ranking of constraints to maintain the existing level of business and to expand the business in the future. The answers offered to rank the intensity of the five constraints (money, agricultural land, labour, market, and knowledge) where each of the numbers mean: (1) low, (2) moderate, (3) medium, (4) high and (5) exceptional.

Tab. 2. Constraints to maintaining the existing level and for expanding the business

Constraint	Maintaining the existing level of business	Enlarging and expanding the business	The present versus the future
Money	4.1	4.2	+0.1
Workforce	3.5	3.9	+0.4
Agricultural land	3.2	3.4	+0.2
Market	3.2	3.4	+0.2
Knowledge	2.5	2.7	+0.2

The biggest constraints, both to maintaining the existing and to enlarging and expanding the future level of farm business, are money and workforce. In addition to a lack of money, which is usually the most critical factor of development, farmers rated workforce as the second most important, before the land, market, and knowledge (Tab 2). Moreover, compared to the current constraints, the highest increase in importance for the future development was recorded for workforce (+0.4 or 11.4%). Specifically, 14% of farms have permanently employed workers, with approximately the same

number relying solely on their own workforce (13%). Most farms (74%) occasionally employ additional workers. These and previous data suggest that additional labour is both a condition and a constraint to increasing and improving agricultural production. Bojnec and Swinnen (2010) conclude from the example of Slovenia that “the inflow of labour into agriculture is largely associated with the unemployment and retirement pools” and “rare from industry and services”. It can be assumed that this is the case in B&H, i.e. that additional labour is recruited primarily from these contingents.

In addition, 65% of the surveyed farms pay for additional workforce. In 15% of cases jobs are done on the principle of mutual assistance, in 14% of cases workers are members of a wider family, and in 5% of cases friends come to help farmers. This means that 1/3 of the farms do not pay for additional workforce, and 2/3 of the farms depend on the supply and price of workforce in the market.

In $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cases (74%), farm workforce consists of family members. It is similar in the EU where approximately three quarters (76.5 %) of EU-28's agricultural labour force in 2013 was provided by family members (EUROSTAT, 2018). The structure of agricultural production in B&H is such that it is still predominantly based on family farms, so the previous data is a logical consequence of such structure. The seasonal workforce accounts for 22% of the total working hours, only 4% being full-time workers.

Given the number of farms hiring additional workforce, the question was whether they find it easier or harder now than before. None of the surveyed farms said that it was easier today, and 69% confirmed that it was more difficult than 3 years ago. If those who do not hire additional labour are excluded from the calculation, this percentage is even higher (81%). It is similar to the cost of workforce. If only those who hire additional workers are taken into account, in 75% of cases they pay their workforce more today than 3 years ago, in 25% of cases they pay the same price, and no one has stated that the workforce is cheaper. The average labour cost is 28.2 EUR/day or 3.0 EUR/hour. Wages vary between 15 and 50 EUR per working day. As noted by Baraldi et. al (2006) „workforce accounts for a considerable proportion of a farm business, overall production costs (as much as 60% in the case of some fruit farms), changes in hourly labour costs can potentially have a significant impact on the structuring of costs for businesses”.

One set of questions was about evaluating employers' attitudes about the competencies of the additional workforce they hire. They were asked to evaluate professionalism, motivation to work, loyalty to employer and the stability of engagement of permanent or part-time workers.

Tab. 3. Assessment of workforce competencies

Competence	Bad	Weak	Medium	Strong	Extremely	Average
Professionalism	12%	18%	61%	5%	5%	2.7
Motivation	7%	19%	59%	9%	6%	2.9
Loyalty	8%	15%	53%	14%	9%	3.0
Stability	8%	14%	53%	14%	11%	3.1

On a Likert-scale basis, answers for each offered attribute range from (1) poor to (5) extremely good.

In accordance with the results shown in Tab 3, employers rated the workforce's expertise as worst, and its stability the best, because they often use the same seasonal workers. Most farmers considered that workers they hire have moderate competencies to perform the job for which they are hired. The situation is similar with motivation, loyalty and stability, with a slightly larger affirmative score in terms of loyalty and stability of the workforce, and the largest number of extremely dissatisfied are in terms of the professionalism of their workforce.

As most farms rely on their own workforce, it is worrying from this point of view that in the previous 12 months, in some 40% of cases, one of the family members left the farm. In 44% of cases the new destination of those who left the farm is abroad, and in 56% of cases it is migration within B&H. The most common reasons for leaving the farm are education (31%), temporary employment (28%), permanent employment (19%), or other reasons (marriage, etc.) (22%). The consequence of abandonment of farms by workforce is labour shortage and increasing workforce cost, as Taylor and Charlton (2018) claim that „workforces move out of agriculture and into non-farm jobs, creating a shortage of farmworkers over time”. In B&H, the solution to filling the labour shortage in agriculture is not immigrants from poor countries, because there are few countries where the price of labour is lower than in B&H, which makes the problem of workforce deficiency more extreme.

Investigating farmers' views regarding their agricultural activities in the future, it became clear that just over a third (35%) of them are ready to abandon agricultural production. Their alternative is going abroad (61%), and it is interesting that no one has opted to leave the farm because of their permanent employment in B&H. The remaining 39% would opt for employment in the place of residence, while maintaining the agricultural business, i.e. for the dual income option. A similar commitment was found by Tocco et al. (2014) in Romania, where “almost 20 per cent of those

individuals who are estimated to have moved from agriculture to industry and services are still working in agriculture as a second job”.

The average opportunity cost of labour that would cause current farmers to abandon agricultural production is EUR 943 per month (net), and the responses ranged from 500 (min.) to 2,500 EUR (max.) per month, with a modus of 1,000 EUR. Indirectly, this is an indication that farmers are now earning less than this amount, because the realistic assumption is that no one would leave the farm for lower monthly income than they currently have.

Most of the surveyed farmers have many years of experience in the agricultural production, with an average of 22.2 years. When asked whether they would continue to do farming in 10 years, only 8.7% responded negatively. The number of those who did not know the answer to this question and those who confirmed that they see themselves in the same business in 10 years is identical (45.7% each). So, about a half of the farms would probably stay in the same business and a half might even leave it, which corresponds with the third that would do it because of going abroad.

Given that B&H has the status of a potential candidate for the EU membership and that it is expected to take the candidate status, the last question referred to the expectations of farmers on the situation of agriculture after joining the EU. There is not much optimism about this, as 30.4% expect to see improvement, and 19.6% to see the deterioration of agriculture after EU accession. Most (50%) could not take a position on this issue.

It is obvious that the workforce will be a serious constraint to the development of agriculture in B&H, especially labour-intensive sectors and that it will be necessary to provide its partial substitution by capital inputs, as concluded in Swinnen et al. (2005) studying the labour market in European countries in transition. This mini-research opened one actual topic of B&H agriculture that deserves further exploration, since one factor of agricultural development, the workforce, which until now has been largely treated as a strength, could easily be considered as one of the weaknesses to its further development in the future.

Conclusions

According to this research, B&H farms carry out most agricultural activities with their own workforce (74%), and for certain tasks engage seasonal (22%) or permanent workers (4%). Most of the hired labour is paid for, and the rest is done by relatives and friends without charge, or it is a mutual help. At the same time, slightly more than a third of the farm owners, besides working on their own farms, are employed somewhere, which is an option of farming that is preferred by some farmers in the future (a dual income farm

model). This suggests that one of the crucial factors for the development of farms is providing additional workforce, which surveyed farmers put on the second place as a limiting factor for the maintenance of the existing and expanding the level of agricultural business in the future. Due to increased migration within B&H and emigration abroad, providing additional workforce is becoming increasingly difficult, as confirmed by more than two thirds of the surveyed farms, where most of the farms were paying the workforce more in 2019 than 3 years ago.

Workers' qualifications in agriculture (professionalism, motivation, loyalty and stability) were rated as average by employers with grades between 2.7 and 3 on a scale of 1 to 5. Regardless the problems with labour and other problems, 2/3 of farms do not intend to leave the agricultural production for employment elsewhere, whereas those who are willing to do so prefer employment abroad. Opinions as to whether they will engage in agriculture in the next 10 years are divided (approximately half-and-half), and similarly about the perspective of agriculture in the case of B&H joining the EU. Some of the respondents' statements to the open question about their experiences with the provision of the labour force are: "nobody wants to work in agriculture and so it is difficult to find workers," "workers are people older than 40, younger people are not interested to work in agriculture for a daily allowance"; "most who want to work went abroad for more money and better conditions." The foregoing conclusions cast doubt on the common assertion that one of the strengths of B&H agriculture is the availability of skilled and cheap labour, and indicates the need for increasing mechanization, automatization and robotization of agricultural operations in the near future. It is also important to plan and implement such agricultural and rural policies, the measures to enable the survival of farms of such a size that most farm work can be carried out by family members (family farms), which guarantee their sustainability from the standpoint of providing the necessary workforce.

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Радна снага и њени трошкови – ограничење развоја пољопривреде у Босни и Херцеговини

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Сажетак

Предмет истраживања је била радна снага, њена доступност и цијена, и њен значај за развој пољопривреде у Босни и Херцеговини (БиХ). Циљ је био утврдити да ли радна снага остаје компаративна предност или је постала ограничење развоја пољопривреде у БиХ. Увод у одабрани предмет истраживања извршен је на основу прегледа литературе, након чега је улиједило властито истраживање базирано на случајно одабраном узорку пољопривредних газдинстава. Резултати истраживања потврдили су да је у БиХ све теже осигурати раднике за сезонске пољопривредне послове и да се газдинства првенствено ослањају на чланове породице, родбину и пријатеље. Цијена рада у пољопривреди расте, али је и даље нижа него у другим секторима и у иностранству, што је разлог зашто радници бјеже од пољопривреде. Газдинства у БиХ у односу на прије три године теже проналазе додатну радну снагу и плаћају је више. Будућа пољопривредна политика у БиХ требала би озбиљно рачунати на породична пољопривредна газдинства и на њихову модернизацију у смислу стварања услова за смањење употребе и супституцију радне снаге.

Кључне ријечи: пољопривреда, радна снага, пољопривредна запосленост, Босна и Херцеговина.

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