

FINLAND

Farm's performance, restructuring & modernisation

Location

Helsinki

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P2 – Competitiveness

Measure

M16 – Cooperation

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 299 618

EAFRD 125 840

National/Regional 173 778

Project duration

2020 – 2021

Project promoter

MTK ry, Töitä Suomesta Oy

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www.toitasuomesta.fi

In response to the seasonal work force crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this project helped to provide counselling and guidance services related to employment issues via multiple communication channels.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on rural areas. Amongst these has been the closing of borders, which restricted the mobility of seasonal farm workers. Of the usual 16 000 foreign seasonal workers needed in Finland annually, only a small percentage were able to enter, and Finnish young people were unaware of the work opportunities available in rural areas. In these circumstances, many farms were about to go bankrupt.

This seasonal labour project hired four employment counsellors, who looked for potential farm workers and marketed the farms to job-seekers. Farms received help from a wide network of groups and individuals, in addition to communication and marketing support. The Töitä Suomesta Oy platform was established at the beginning of the KoroKausi project and is owned by MTK, ProAgria Keskusten Liitto and the 'Villages of Finland' group. Thanks to the KoroKausi project, national organisations brought their experience together and can support companies all over Finland, now and in the future.



Results

In comparison to the situation at the start of the scheme, the handling of the pandemic related issues went well. The project helped to find employees for almost all farms that sought help from the service.

Two major communications campaigns, via advertisements placed on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, reached 960 000 and 300 000 Finns respectively. Natural (wild) berry picking was also of interest to the media, and the website www.Toitäsuomesta.fi, which has about 7 000 registered users, had around 2 100 farm jobs available on one occasion.

The farms and the workers experiences were gathered through a survey carried out in August 2020. It emerged that around half of the 126 employer-respondents would recruit a domestic workforce in future years, and two-thirds of the 50 worker-respondents were interested in doing seasonal work again.

The platform the project created responds to the constant need for both domestic and foreign seasonal worker recruitment and is especially useful during such a critical situation.

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on rural areas. Amongst these has been the closing of borders, which restricted the mobility of seasonal farm workers. Out of the usual 16 000 foreign seasonal workers needed in Finland annually, only a small percentage were able to enter the country. Finnish young people were not aware of the available work opportunities in rural areas. Amidst the pandemic, many farms were about to go bankrupt and concern about the security of supply chains was felt everywhere.

A workforce needs assessment was conducted in March 2020 based on a questionnaire to which 836 rural companies around Finland responded. It became clear that all production sectors in agriculture relied to some extent on a seasonal workforce and, without this, most of the crops could not be harvested. These concerns also impacted on future crops as in most cases the preparatory work is done for the following season. Similarly, future seed production became endangered.

Many companies responded that they may permanently close down if the workforce crisis could not be resolved. The questionnaire revealed that seasonal workers were needed in early spring; with 18 % of the respondents saying that they needed workers immediately that month, in March. Most respondents reported that they would need up to around 14 000 seasonal workers in July. However, since the questionnaire was concerned specifically with farms, the wider overall needs of rural Finland would be even higher.

In the worst-case scenario, the workforce situation could become an agricultural emergency. Therefore, there was an urgent need for decision-making and action concerning workforce availability, especially as worker lay-offs and dismissals in other economic sectors had released plenty of potential workers into the jobs market.

Objectives

The main goal of this project was to find the necessary domestic workforce for agricultural companies that would normally rely on foreign migrant workers. The project was also able to promote the supply of approved foreign seasonal workers in cooperation with the authorities.

In addition, the project helped domestic jobseekers to find work in rural areas, and it is hoped that this model will continue to connect farms with their local, domestic workforce in the future: raising the profile of seasonal farm work amongst Finnish jobseekers.

Activities

The project employed four employment counsellors. These were region-specific advising companies under fixed-term contracts and their work was supported by a wide network of additional actors and service providers. In addition, other partners joined, including the Finnish Glasshouse Growers' Association, Hedelmän-ja Marjanviljelijäin liitto and SLC (Swedish Agricultural Producers' Central Association). The project reached out to both employers and jobseekers to facilitate direct contact between the two and provide new approaches to marketing work opportunities that would reach a broader audience via cooperation with diverse platforms and stakeholders (such as [toitasuomesta.fi](https://www.toitasuomesta.fi), the [Toitäsuoemesta/Employment and Economic Development \(TE\)](https://www.toitasuomesta.fi) administration and various employment agencies).

The seasonal workforce situation received a great deal of public attention. The project and its implementer MTK spoke publicly about the issue and the aim of recruiting domestic workers, providing background information and guidance for different parties through their communications and marketing campaign. All efforts were to support the aim of finding workers for rural farms during exceptional times. The KoroKausi project also supported the national [#marjatalookoot](https://www.marjatalookoot.fi) campaign as the entry of the natural berry picker workforce was at risk.

In addition, four newspaper advertisements were published, to remind potential employers that recruitment assistance was available and to make job seekers aware of upcoming seasonal work opportunities. The employment counsellors contacted hundreds of farms to review their workforce needs and support them in setting up advertisements. Job applicants applied for the positions directly through the advertisements published on [toitasuomesta.fi](https://www.toitasuomesta.fi). Some registered for the [toitäsuoemesta.fi](https://www.toitasuomesta.fi) service and created their own worker profiles for employers and/or proactively contacted the project in search of work. The project also directly contacted the applicants who had left their information on the portal when farm workers were needed.

Working together with the TE (Employment) Offices, the project ensured that up-to-date information about the regional employers and the general situation was available to all. Activities and information events were organised for both employers and job applicants, and in addition to this, employers were kept aware of opportunities via regular group communications, direct contact and newspaper articles. TE services were made more familiar to the employers.

The TE Offices had a contact person for each of the employment counsellors, and in North Savonia and North Karelia, cooperated with the Työvoimaa tiloille ESR project (organisers of the MTK North Savonia, ProAgria Eastern Finland, Savonia, Maaseutuammattiin ry and Suonenjoen seudun maanviljelijäin yhdistys ry).

Other networking and cooperation activities were conducted on the basis of identified workforce potential. Students were contacted via student organisations and study counsellors from different educational institutions (around 140 contacts). Together with the Private Employment Agencies Association, question and answer information sheets were compiled, in particular regarding the possible needs of temporary jobs. Contacts were made with about 15 employment agencies, businesses and co-operatives. Employers were informed about these different workforce recruitment possibilities.

Main results

Compared to the forecasts at the start of the situation, the handling of the seasonal workforce during the pandemic went well. In the spring, some of the farms decided to cut production, which somewhat decreased the workforce needs of the sector. Farms also made other exceptional arrangements during the summer, as a result of the COVID-19 social distancing measures. In addition, the high turnover of the domestic workforce, which included many first-timers, created additional work and costs for the farms.

The project helped in finding employees for almost all farms that sought aid from the service, although many of them did not look for help early enough, often because they expected foreign workers would arrive.

The worst-case scenario projection was avoided, and crops were saved. There were some risks because employers did not proceed with domestic recruitment until the last minute. However, emergency situations were avoided, the necessary work force was gathered through a combination of foreign and domestic workers.

Easing the movement of the foreign work force from farm to farm through exceptional arrangements also facilitated the overall situation.

Two major communications campaigns, via advertisements placed on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, reached 960 000 (the Poikkeustekijä campaign) and 300 000 (the Marjatalokoot campaign) Finns respectively. Natural (wild) berry picking was also of interest to the media, and the Töitäsuoemesta.fi website, which has around 7 000 registered users, had around 2 100 farm jobs open at one time.

Information about the problems of bringing in a seasonal workforce during the pandemic reached the whole Finnish population and many countries looked to Finland as an example of how to respond.

The experiences of both the farms and the workers were gathered through a survey in August 2020. It emerged that in future around half of the 126 employer-respondents plan to recruit a domestic workforce, and that two-thirds of the 50 worker-respondents would do seasonal work again.

The platform the project created responds to the constant need for seasonal worker recruitment, both domestic and foreign, and is especially useful during such a critical situation.

Additional sources of information

[www.facebook.fi/toitasuoemesta](https://www.facebook.com/toitasuoemesta)