

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the health of seasonal workers must be guaranteed

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Eco Ruralis Association, the Romanian member of European Coordination Via Campesina, criticizes the Romanian Government's decision to lift the traveling restrictions for seasonal workers without fully regulating their transport during the Covid-19 pandemic, hence exposing them to the risk of getting infected with Coronavirus and opting for the most cynical solution to deal with the poverty of an important part of Romanian population.

Taking note of:

- a) the introduction by the Romanian Government of a new article (art. 10) in the Military Decree no. 7 from the 4th of April 2020, regarding measures to preventing Covid-19 infection that allows transport of seasonal workers from Romania to other states via charters,
- b) the additions of the Military Decree no. 8 from the 9th of April 2020,
- c) the fact that the coronavirus pandemic hasn't reached its end, many countries prolonging their restriction measures with another 30 days, Romania included, and with the World Health Organisation's confirmation that the current crisis is serious and a long-lasting one¹,

Considering:

- the difficulties that countries, in particular Western-European countries, face due to the high number of people with Covid-19 and the numerous deaths in a short while,
- that most of the seasonal workers come from rural areas.

Once again, rural people are being put in the front lines, sacrificed in the name of free market and free movement of capital, including human capital. Though they carry out a fundamental role in society– feeding their communities and urban people, they are the most affected by poverty and voided of support from state institutions. Instead of finding solutions to support their livelihood and increase rural economy, the institutions push people to be dependent of jobs in other countries, with no guarantee that their health will be protected, especially during the pandemic.

Among the measures adopted in Military Decrees, to prevent Covid-19 occurrence, the government must consider protection of the entire population and not deepen the inequality gap between the social classes, the rural and the urban, thus contributing to increasing poverty and the risk for a greater crisis than the current one.

At the same time, we are asking ourselves, who will bear the health costs and who will be taken accountable in front of the consequences of potential dramatic situations among thousands of seasonal workers who already left Romania. Even in spite of verbal reassurances from hosting countries that quarantine and social distancing measures at work place will be respected, we find out from the media² that seasonal workers' transfer takes place with no compliance to restrictions imposed by the Military Decrees: thousands of people waiting the charters in airports, without any social distancing measures taken, presence of people from quarantined regions or pick-up from the airport in similar conditions.

1 https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/covid-19-sprp-unct-guidelines.pdf?sfvrsn=81ff43d8_4

2 http://stiri.tvr.ro/cluj-aglomera-ie-la-aerport-dupa-ce-sute-de-oameni-pleaca-spre-germania-la-munca_859318.html#view

Health and dignity are not optional, they are fundamental rights that must be ensured for everyone and, even with more responsibility during this pandemic. Romanian seasonal workers are fully-righted citizens, and though forgotten by the public policies of the last decades, at the end of their contracts they come back to Romania investing in their local communities, they are the diaspora whose support has been times and times again.

In the light of the recent events, Eco Ruralis is publicly stating following proposals:

The Romanian Government to take accountability for the safety of migrant seasonal workers from food and agriculture sector and to guarantee the implementation of all Covid-19 prevention measures, as well as by the governments of hosting countries, the recruiting agencies, companies and farms involved in establishing working contracts, transport and the work itself carried out by seasonal workers, from the moment of leaving Romania to the return back in the country, including:

- a) Regulation of charters intended for transport of seasonal workers, so that all prevention measures against Covid-19 occurrence to be implemented; this implies allocation of personnel at national airports to ensure maintenance and adherence to the prevention measures against Covid-19 occurrence among seasonal workers scheduled to leave for other states;
- b) Binding recruiting agencies and employers to inform seasonal workers and ensure all necessary means in order to prevent Covid-19 occurrence along the hiring process, traveling, and during the work itself carried out in the hosting country;
- c) Bilateral public and firm commitments between Romania and the hosting countries of seasonal workers that preventing Covid-19 occurrence measures are being respected (eg. controls carried out at employers or farms by the competent authorities from hosting countries);
- d) Establishing a toll-free telephone numbers available for seasonal workers to call whenever Covid-19 prevention measures are violated by employers in the hosting countries.

**Eco Ruralis is a Romanian nation-wide peasants' association reuniting over 13.000 members, representing the interests and rights of peasants, small-scale producers and people working in rural areas.*

Contact persons:

• **Ms. Ramona Duminicioiu – member of the Coordination Committee of Eco Ruralis**, tel. no.: +40 746.337.022, e-mail: ramona@ecoruralis.ro, ecoruralis@gmail.com

• **Ms. Raluca Dan – Eco Ruralis office**, tel. no.: +40 728.357.367, e-mail: raluca@ecoruralis.ro, ecoruralis@gmail.com