LABOUR TURNOVER & CERTIFIED SKILLS: TEMPORARY FARMWORKERS IN THE DECIDUOUS FRUIT SECTOR IN CERES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Farms in Ceres report a high labour turnover of temporary farmworkers. However, few studies have been done on their labour turnover in the world and such studies, done in the USA (Taylor & Thilmany, 1993:358) and Canada (Smit, Johnston & Morse, 1985), are not based on interviews with workers. Further, although 11% of agricultural workers in South Africa are skilled (Statistics South Africa, 2015) it is unknown to what extent temporary farmworkers receive skills training. Thus, this study sought to research the skills of temporary farmworkers, their labour turnover and reasons for these through direct consultation with workers.

The study found that 13% of temporary farmworkers do not complete the length of their fixed-term contracts due to working conditions on farms, care and household responsibilities as well as a shortage of housing in the area.

Further, temporary farmworkers do not receive any certified skills training, from public institutions or employers.

AUTHOR:
Anne Wiltshire
Sociologist at Stellenbosch University
annewiltshire@hotmail.com
16th September 2016
INTRODUCTION
South Africa is the second largest producer of deciduous fruit in the southern hemisphere and Ceres accounts for 28% of South African production (Hortgro 2014a, 2014b). As such, this study pertains to commercial farms in Ceres which adhere to international, national and provincial agricultural regulations and codes of conduct in buyer-driven global value chains. In this respect, these farms are subject to regular audits assessing ethical, environmental, labour, housing, health and safety standards.

The short shelf life of produce coupled with the fact that most fruit is exported, means that farms pick and pack produce on the same day for shipment to international markets. Farms thus require a large workforce during the peak harvesting season of November to March. This workforce has a distinct gender-race nexus due to the legacy of Apartheid legislation. The Native Service act of 1932, turning sharecroppers in to wage labourers, forced tenants to work on farms for three to six months at least. This led to the gendered division of labour as men constituted the core of the workforce, throughout the year, supplemented by women. The racial division of labour was a consequence of the Coloured Labour Preference Act of 1957, which restricted employment on farms in the Western Cape to the recruitment of local coloured workers lest no other workers were available.

Thus, traditionally, in Ceres farmworkers were coloured, with men employed permanently and women supplementing these in thinning and harvesting seasons. Although some black African men, mainly from the Eastern Cape, were employed temporarily and accommodated in on-farm temporary housing, after the abolition of influx controls in 1986 their numbers increased (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYMENT TRENDS IN CERES BETWEEN 1983 AND 2015

Source: Adapted from agriculture censuses (Central Statistical Service, 1987; 1990; 1998) and the Koue Bokkeveld Opleidingsentrum (2015).

Job shedding on mines and greater social grant cash transfers in the 1990s, spurred on increased migration to the region of Ceres. This increased housing demands, the shortage of which led to the growth of informal settlements housing farmworkers.

FIGURE 0: TRENDS IN THE AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND CERES BETWEEN 1983 & 2015

Post-apartheid economic policies liberalising South African markets led to leaner production strategies including flexibilisation of the workforce and mechanisation. For example, between 1995 and 1996 alone grape harvesters in the wine grape sector increased by 52%, each one “replac[ing] as many as 70 workers per 12-hour shift” (Ewert & du Toit, 2005:328). Thus, a consequence of mechanisation was job shedding, however, the deciduous fruit sector has not been as amenable to mechanisation due to the bruising of produce. Thus, although agricultural employment across South Africa declined by 56%, in Ceres employment grew 261%, since 1983 (Figure 2).

Flexibilisation also led to casualised job growth as permanent employment remained almost stable, as opposed to the growth of temporary employment in Ceres from 40% to 63% of the workforce (Figure 2). However, job growth was racialized and gendered, due to increases in black African temporary farmworkers, especially men (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3: CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF FARMWORKERS IN CERES BETWEEN 2000 & 2015**

![Graph showing changing demographics of farmworkers in Ceres between 2000 and 2015.]


Today employment on farms in Ceres remains marked by a particular gender-race division of labour. This is because black African workers have been accommodated into unskilled work, which coloured farmworkers traditionally performed, along with a shift of coloured workers into higher skilled positions. In this respect, temporarily employed black African men (91%) and women (72%) tend to work in orchards, while, in higher skilled positions, coloured women work in packinghouses (75%) and coloured men in orchards (46%) and packinghouses (36%).

**RESEARCH METHODS**

This study was conducted where a large residential area of temporary off-farm workers borders farms in Ceres. This is because farmworkers living on farms are obliged to work on those farms, as did 18% of the workers surveyed in this study, whilst living off-farms workers have freedom to choose their workplaces.

This research design followed a sequential exploratory mixed methods strategy. Key themes from 40 qualitative interviews with temporary off-farm workers and key informants are substantiated by four focus groups. Subsequently, these findings formed a grounded indicator approach to design a survey interviewing 200 temporary off-farm workers employed across four farms in Ceres during January 2015.

**LABOUR TURNOVER**

The average labour turnover of temporary off-farm workers in Ceres is 13%, ranging between 4% to 31% across farms. This is based on workers’ reports of not completing the full lengths of their contracts between February 2014 and January 2015, half of which occurred on farms not included in this study. Labour turnover was due to working conditions on farms (52%), care and household responsibilities of coloured women (24%) and a shortage of housing in the area (16%).
Labour turnover due to **working conditions** on farms refers to a number of factors. Firstly, workers reported leaving employment due to the inability of workers to accrue their expected earnings, citing that some employers adjusted the agreed piece-rate wages after completion of the work to minimum wage levels. Secondly, poor communication skills and unprofessional workplace behaviour, such as alcohol consumption and co-worker conflict, as well as the perceived unequal treatment of workers, decreased co-worker affinity and workers’ affinity with employers, thereby increasing labour turnover. Lastly, the disjuncture between black African workers’ preference to return home over the December festive period and the high season of the deciduous fruit sector increases the labour turnover of these.

A quarter of labour turnover (24%) is due to **household and care responsibilities** of coloured women. This is because of the gendered division of labour between paid work and unpaid social reproductive work and because black African workers tend to migrate to the area for work leaving their children in familial care in sending communities. The shortage of formal childcare facilities in the area coupled with the low wages of farmworkers means that alternative (pre-primary) childcare is provided by family members, friends and designated unemployed people living in residential communities. In this manner, the shortage of childcare, as well as reliable and affordable options increases the labour turnover of coloured temporary off-farm women.

The **shortage of housing** in the area is due to the inability of the municipality to meet growing demands for public housing resulting from the growth of rural migration to urban centres or regions of employment. This has meant that there has been a growth in informal housing. Further, residents conglomerate in large households because younger generations cannot find or afford independent housing. Some workers are recalled to family homes after the death of a breadwinner in the household or lacking a permanent residence move between households. This means that households are structured around income earners and resign due changes in residences. Finally, cramped living conditions and low quality housing increase worker illnesses and thereby labour turnover.

Temporary workers returning to work for the same employer over successive harvesting seasons, the survival rate, ranged between 22% to 58%. This was shown to increase in accordance with employment security through contracts of longer duration, as through mixed farming of deciduous fruit and vegetables. Employment in close proximity to residential areas also increased the survival rate of women in packinghouses, as did better working conditions for men in orchards.

**CERTIFIED SKILLS**

Only 2.6% of temporary off-farm workers have ever received any certified skills training, such training occurring whilst they were permanently employed. **Temporary farmworkers do not receive certified skills training** for a number of reasons. Firstly, some temporary off-farm workers receive uncertified on the job training whilst employed. Secondly, formal training on farms is conducted out of peak harvesting season, when the majority of temporary workers are not employed. Thirdly, employers are reluctant to invest in the certified skills training of workers who may not remain in employment for the duration of the training or return to the same farm for employment. For instance, depending on the employer, between 4% to 31% of temporary off-farm workers do not work the full length of their contracts, while those returning to work for the same employer ranges between 22% to 58%. Fourthly, employers receive no subsidies for training temporary farmworkers. This is because the Skills Development Act defines learners dichotomously as either (fully) employed learners (18.1) or (fully) unemployed learners (18.2) (Department of Labour, 2008). This means that temporary (partially) employed learners are not specifically catered for.

Currently, there are three manners is which the **labour force can access subsidised skills training**. Firstly, to train a temporary farmworker on a workplace learnership, the worker has to be an existing employee and enter into a learnership contract, during which time the employer can apply to **Agricultural Sector Education Training Authority** (AgriSETA) for a grant to subsidise training costs. Secondly, unemployed workers can
register as a work-seeker with the Department of Labour and apply for a learnership position that an employer advertises at the Department of Labour. If their application were successful, the employer and worker would enter into an employment contract and learnership contract for the duration of the training during which time the employer can apply to AgriSETA for a grant to subsidise training costs. Thirdly, being registered as a work-seeker they may access skills training through the National Skills Fund which subsidises training in further education training colleges and public work programmes, for instance.

However, on the Community Works Programme (CWP), for example, the budget is spent on a ratio of 65:35 on wages to non-wage costs (including training), meaning that there is little funding left for training and, according to a case study in Grabouw, CWP workers do not receive certified training (Wiltshire, 2016). This is partly a reflection of the ratio of government spending on skills development levies of 80:20 on workplace learnerships to un/under-employed skills funding (Department of Labour, 2008), which stands in sharp contrast to the ratio of 35:65 of permanent employees to un/under-employed workers in the South African workforce (Statistics South Africa, 2015). In this manner, no temporary off-farmworker has ever received any certified skills training while temporarily employed and although temporary off-farm workers register as job-seekers, 15% in 2014, none have ever received certified training through the Department of Labour. This means that temporary farmworkers are not receiving training whilst employed or unemployed. In this respect, skills development legislation is premised on the assumption of labour market security and does not recognise the growing numbers of casualised workers in South Africa (52%), currently 63% of farmworkers in Ceres (Statistics South Africa, 2015; the Koue Bokkeveld Opleidingsentrum, 2015).

Having said this, some farms offer on-the-job training, even though this is uncertified, those who acquire such skills are able to work for longer periods during the year owing to the fact employers give preference to skilled workers. As Mcebisi explained, “I can’t get work now because I can’t prune the trees” (Xhosa temporary male farmworker, 42 years old) and “if you can’t prune the supervisor doesn’t employ you because he doesn’t have time to teach you” (Johan, permanent coloured male, farm supervisor, 27 years old).

Most temporary off-farm workers (78%) would like certified skills training, citing that this would increase their frequency of employment (36%), ability to be promoted (22%) as well as their knowledge and skills (25%). Workers would prefer training in general farm work skills (42%), such as picking and pruning, technical skills (38%), including driving, irrigation, farming and pest control, as well as supervisory and managerial skills (20%), such as supervisors, quality controllers and production managers.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this study suggest that reductions in labour turnover could be achieved through, firstly, workplace policies and training increasing professional communication and conduct in the workplace. Secondly, a collaboration between key stakeholders to increase housing stock and childcare facilities in the region would increase the percentage of workers completing the full-length of their contracts. Thirdly, spurring on mixed farming would create employment of longer duration and increase the survival rate of temporary farmworkers.

Further, special legislative provision is required for subsidised skills training of temporary farmworkers. This may be through defining temporary learners as a separate 18.3 category in the Skills Development legislation. Amendments could, for instance, allow workers who complete the length of their temporary contracts to access workplace skills training during periods of unemployment, or give preference to employing successful learners the following peak season. Workers could thus access workplace training out of peak season whilst registered work-seekers and employers could claim a percentage of temporary employed learner’s wages as subsidy - without the requirement to enter into employment contracts during training - from Sectoral Education Training Authorities, who oversee most (80%) of the public skills budget.
REFERENCES


