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## WORKING CONDITIONS IN AGRICULTURE AS AN ELEMENT OF THE QUALITY OF EMPLOYMENT IN THE SECTOR

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### ABSTRACT

Working conditions are an inseparable part of the welfare of population. They are a basic indicator for the quality of employment, a prerequisite for good economic development, competitiveness and employment rate. The objective of this paper is to analyse the working conditions in agriculture judging on a variety of their elements. The following conclusions have been systematized: investment in the quality of employment invariably leads to a better economic development; working conditions have very clearly expressed company and branch characteristics; working conditions in agriculture have clearly discernible risks in regard to some of their elements and lack of risk in regard to others; a purposeful state policy in the field of working conditions will lead to achieving some efficient socio-economic results.

**Key words:** working conditions, employment, agriculture, quality of employment.

The global financial crisis inevitably exerts its influence on the development of labor markets and working conditions as an element of the quality of labor. Nowadays working conditions are one of the basic elements of the emphases in the modern social policy of the Republic of Bulgaria. They vary a lot according to the particular economic activities and depend to a considerable degree on the character and technology of the production process. The provision of these working conditions is determined by the existing regulatory basis and employers' attitude to such issues. In the basis of the system for Healthy and safe working conditions (HSWC) there lie the Code of labor and the Act for healthy and safe working conditions, as well as the respective regulatory statutes. In this respect Bulgaria has introduced all European directives that operate in this field.

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Working conditions are an inseparable part of the welfare of population. They are also a basic indicator for the quality of employment, a prerequisite for good economic development, competitiveness and employment rate. The objective of this paper is to analyse the working conditions in agriculture judging on a variety of their elements.

“Healthy and safe working conditions are vitally important conditions of dignified labor... Dignified labor must be safe and we still have a lot of work to do in order to achieve this goal.” – states in his report the former Director-General of the International labor organisation Juan Somavia (1).

Working conditions are a broad category as defined by Prof. K. Spassov (2), and they create the necessary prerequisites for efficient use of the workforce and successive achievement of the production and economic goals of an enterprise. Good working conditions protect workers and strengthen their motivation, playing, at the same time, a vital role for bigger competitiveness and

productivity of enterprises which makes them a basic indicator for the quality of employment.

That is why the policy of every management needs to be oriented at all-time improvement of the organisation for managing the activity for providing healthy and safe working conditions, it also needs to be an inseparable part of the control for cutting costs and increasing the

efficiency of work. Creating good working conditions and optimum safety need to be one of the primary cares of the management of an enterprise, since they can add considerable value for the business to develop.

Working conditions are actually a set of various elements which can be classified in several groups: **(Table 1)**.

**Table 1. CLASSIFICATION OF THE ELEMENTS OF WORKING CONDITIONS**

<b>Element of working conditions</b>	<b>Characteristic feature</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Type of work	A complex element. Includes a description of the typical place where work is done, the degree of technological dependence of labor, the use of modern technologies, as well as the preparation of those employed to perform tasks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has an impact on the employee's satisfaction with work;</li> <li>• affects the the employee's health and good performance in doing the tasks assigned;</li> </ul>
Working environment	Ergonomic factors of the working environment – doing repetitive actions, applying force, speed of work, static pressure and others. It includes also the factors of the working environment – noise, dust, vibration, ionic radiation, work with chemical products, contact with biological products, contact with parasites, mildew, microorganisms and others.	Has an impact on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• health;</li> <li>• the psycho-social aspects of work;</li> <li>• employee's satisfaction with the working environment;</li> </ul>
Organisation of work	Concerns independence of work, its intensity, speed, the opportunity to have support at work from colleagues and supervisors, from outside, as well as interruption of the working process.	Affects the quality of work;
Working hours	Defines the employees' rhythm of life and has strong economic impact. Bulgarian legislation regulates the ordinary duration of working hours – 40 hours per week, a 5-day working week.	The duration, schedule and organisation of the working hours determine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the quality of work;</li> <li>• how labor and one's personal life connect and balance each other;</li> <li>• how time is organised outside work.</li> </ul>
Work and health	The risk for health while working can be a result of three basic factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• technological reasons that are impossible to control immediately: (even modern technologies have elements that have an impact on employees' health);</li> <li>• poor physical working conditions that can be directly influenced, within the technological framework, though;</li> <li>• poor psychological working conditions that are difficult to influence because of their dependence on other factors;</li> </ul>	Influences productivity and motivation for labor.

Payment for the work done	Any payment or any wage that can be calculated in money and certified in agreements or in national legislation, the latter being a power of contract, is paid by the employer to the employee for the work he does (3).	Influences: motivation of the workforce and hence – productivity.
Information and consultation	Informing and consulting play an important role for improving the working conditions and enabling employees to express their own opinion, as well as for the changes that are probably going to have an impact on their work. Their right to be informed about the risks while working is a fundamental right of employees and a prerequisite for more effective prevention of the risks in regard to work.	Has an indirect importance for the efficiency of the economic activity.
Work and life outside work	Satisfactory work-life balance is achieved when an individual's right of full-bodied life at work and outside it is accepted and respected as a norm, for the mutual benefit of the individual, the business and the society.	The existence of such balance guarantees: qualitative activity at work, higher labor productivity, lowers stress and leads to a higher degree of employee satisfaction.

In respect to economic conditions at work here is what is characteristic about employment in agriculture: labor productivity depends on climatic conditions and the quality of land; seasons have an impact; work in agriculture relates to the use of living organisms (animals, plants); there is no specialization of labor; the degree of mechanisation of the working process is comparatively low; people work both in public production and in private farms; non-farming labor is limited by the availability of raw materials; a high percentage of women, youth and adults take part in production.

In the field of agriculture the great variety of forms of land ownership and methods of production in agriculture form numerous types of labor relations. Most part of the workforce is employed in small farms which presupposes the high share of self-employed and workers with families. In 2010 in 371 000 farms 751 500 people were employed; the relative share of self-employed and workers with families being 92.8% or 697 400 people. Those who invested labor in agriculture as hired workers were 54 300 (4).

In a study of the working conditions made by the Ministry of labor and social policy (MLSP) it is pointed out that working conditions in farming are characterised by strongly expressed risks

judged on some specific elements and the lack of risks judged on others (5).

In the sector, for the element “**type of work**” it is characteristic that those of the employees who work outside the company/organisation are much more compared to the average level for the country. The predominant reason for this fact is the nature of farming work rather than the introduction of new technologies or the organization of work.

The low degree of technological innovation in the sector creates many risks for its future economic development. We can point out that the use of information technologies enters this sector too and the degree remains much lower compared to that in other sectors of economy (6).

Introducing information technologies is a condition for accelerated development, improved working conditions and employees' satisfaction. It sets a prerequisite for increasing the qualification of those employed in the sector and, respectively, leads also to higher labor productivity.

The work of farming workers is characterised by performing unvaried tasks, which gives confidence to the employed that they have the necessary skills for doing the work and lowers

the need for training (**Table 2**). According to data of Head directorship of labor (HDL) this sector also has the lowest number of employed

who have been trained recently – training paid both by the employer or themselves (**Table 3**).

**Table 2. SELF-ASSESSMENT OF TASK PERFORMANCE IN %**

Need for more training	Assigned tasks comply with skills	Have skills for more important tasks	Total
7,5%	73,6%	18,9%	100 %

*S o u r c e: MLSP, Paper on the results of the national study of working conditions in Bulgaria*

**Table 3. TRAINING IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS IN %**

Paid by the employer	Paid by the employed	In the process of work by colleagues	Self training at work	Other
16,7%	3,7%	16,7%	13,0%	1,9%

*S o u r c e: MLSP, Paper on the results of the national study of working conditions in Bulgaria*

Continuous learning is hardly a common process. Those employed seldom take part in training sessions – both paid by the employer and themselves. It makes an impression that among the types of training the one in the process of work is considerably undervalued. Besides, the people hired do not assess as especially important the chance to learn new things in the process of work. This allows us to conclude that the reasons for the bad situation in the sector on the basis of this indicator are the lack of organising training sessions and ones in the process of work by employers, as well as the low assessment given by workers to the importance of life-long learning process.

Introducing highly productive technique and technology in the sector, as well as highly productive types of plants and animal breeds requires highly qualified workforce, with more knowledge and experience in production in order to provide more complicated production. Higher education level and high qualification of those employed in agriculture are vitally important for the successful development of the sector. In order for companies to perform well, they need to start activities for developing the skills of the employees, for increasing their qualification and for regular assessment of the needs of the staff for training.

As for the second element of the working conditions – “**the working environment**”, the

agricultural sector has no risk. Data show that in assessing 17 indicators neither deviates considerably from the average level for the country as a whole. However, there are several factors of the working environment that exert negative influence on the people employed in the sector.

Physical risks of the working environment are exposure to too high or too low air temperatures. The employees are exposed to the risky impact of a single ergonomic factor of the working environment – they spend a large part of their working hours either in standing position or walking. Obviously, these risks result from the specific activity and it is hard to avoid their influence. The risks of the working environment determine the need for using individual protective means and working clothes. In the study «Working conditions in Bulgaria» of MLSP it is pointed out that 64.8 % of the employers in the agricultural sector report the need for individual protective devices, 64.7% provide protective devices to their employees, 0.8% do not do that and 34.5% think that it is not necessary to do it. Special working clothes are provided by 52.6% of the employers (5).

The new forms of organising the work stress on a flexible structure of management, higher degree of autonomy on various levels and teamwork (7).

On national level autonomy of work is relatively limited, but the people employed in agriculture have a sufficient extent of independence compared to the remaining sectors. The working conditions in the sector are not characterized by high intensity and speed of work. The workers have access to support at work – by colleagues, supervisors or from outside.

The only indicator for which risky values are available for the indicator “**organization of work**” is “interruption of work affects its quality” (5). Employees’ work is not interrupted often in order to perform occasional tasks. However, intermissions of work influence its quality in an exceptionally negative way, simply because part of the productive activities should not be interrupted, this can affect the workload rhythm. For this indicator in the study (5) there has been reported the highest degree of risk in the agricultural sector. Therefore, employers need to focus their attention on such organization of work that is possible to lower to a maximum extent the risks for their employees’ health and the consequences of these risks.

“**Working hours**” is one of the basic indicators for the working conditions. The agricultural sector is not among the riskiest in the working conditions judged on this element. However, the people employed often have longer working hours. Above the average level for the country is the number of employees who work 50 hours per week and of those who work more than that. In measuring the working hours in working days for those employed in the agricultural sector there are also values registered higher than the average nationwide.

Irregular working hours (in the evening and in the night, more than 10 hours daily, on weekends and holidays) seriously affects the chance for employees to have a good rest and, respectively, for the workforce to recover as suitable. Those employed in agriculture work more on weekends compared to the average for the country, but they do not work more than 10 hours, in the evening or in the night (5).

The organisation of working hours in the agricultural sector reflects the specifics of work itself. Since in the sector there is seldom uninterrupted cycle of production, logically only 5.6% of the employees work in shifts. A huge

part of the people employed work the same hours daily, as well as the same number of days in the week with fixed starting and closing time. Besides, the people employed in this sector have the most opportunities to choose their own working schedule which is enough ground to accept that there is no risk for the employees judged on this indicator.

The length of the working hours is not the only significant factor in the relation working schedule and health. It is important to have in mind to what extent the working hours are part of the remaining non-working activities. Some irregular working schedules (night-time, work on weekends and holidays (on Sundays) can limit one's social life and affect the balance work - personal life. Such working schedule is incompatible with the human biological rhythm. Especially night work is related to sleep disorders and digestion, heart diseases and others. Another important factor is how regular and predictable a working schedule is. Frequent changes in it, alternating long and short working days and especially the unpredictability of the working schedule for the coming weeks and months can have ruinous consequences for one's health. Similar situations become more frequent as a result of the policy of flexible working time that actually makes people contribute for the direct needs of production. Thus periods of time when the employer requires from the worker to be at his disposal cannot be accepted as the worker's leisure time as long as quality of rest is concerned, as well as organising household chores, choice of entertainment in one's free time and so on (8).

The irregular working hours or working in shifts can affect the risk of accidents at work since they have an impact on the worker's concentration, the working environment (for ex. light) and the organisation of work itself (for ex. less staff, weaker control, more various tasks). About 20% of the European workers work in shifts, the same number work a certain amount of time in the night (5).

The agricultural sector is characterised by a relatively lower degree of absence for health reasons – data show that these are only 14.8%. Lower than the average indicator for the country is also the share of employees who think that work has an impact on their health. The share of

accidents at work is on the same level as that of the country average and no increase is observed. It is necessary to note though, that the assessment of official statistical data for traumas at work leads to finding a risk in the sector judged on this indicator. However, employers are on a sick leave relatively seldom. This defines a significant risk for the sector since there, irrespective of the risk, employees would rather not get medical treatment (9).

The relation «work – health», however, is reciprocal. Just as health affects work, work has an impact on health and can worsen the health status of workforce. This relation manifests itself into practice as a vicious circle in which work, because of dangerous technology or bad working conditions, worsens the health status of the workforce and the latter, in turn, decreases labor productivity because of employees' limited physical and psychological abilities for labor, leaves of absence, interruption of the working process, low motivation for labor and so on. This means that, more or less, work poses a risk for employees' health. This natural risk for their health is made up by providing access to health support at work. The bigger the risk is, the bigger the need for providing such health services. Traumas at work are an objective indicator for unfavorable impact of work and the place of work on employees' health. The definition for accident at work is «a particular case in the course of work that leads to psychological or physical injury» (10). The definition excludes intentional self-inflicted injuries, accidents on the way to and from work (incidents while traveling), incidents that have only medical origin and professional illness. The phrase «in the course of work» means the time when a person is busy doing professional work or the time he/she spends working. This includes transport accidents in the course of work (11).

Traditionally, the number of men working in agriculture is bigger, therefore, the relative share of accidents at work for men is bigger too. The share of accidents at work that affect women is relatively bigger in agriculture than in other sectors where male workforce prevail. This is a result of the fact that in agriculture there are no tasks specific for women only. Women often do the same work as men, that is why they are exposed to the same professional risks (12).

Most specific risks relate to how big agricultural machines function and are transported. Road accidents are one of the most common reasons for injuries in the agricultural sector, they often occur in the course of the high season when the long working hours and stress increase the risk of accidents owing to tiredness. Other professional risks in the sector are contact with chemicals and products for plant protection. In the first quarter of 2013 there were 2 accidents at work in agriculture, the total number for the whole country being 717 (13).

The specific instruments or social initiatives aimed at preventing accidents at work in agriculture are scarce and the issues of safety at work are usually regulated in the general regulatory statutes. Thus, for example, on a company level it is necessary to set up labor committees or an organ for healthy and safe working conditions. These representatives of the employers are responsible for informing and consulting workers about safety issues, explaining rules and clarifying risks at work. They are entitled to extra payment and annual training in AHCW.

As for the sixth element of the working conditions “**payment for the work done**” in the agricultural sector there are observed no considerable deviations from the way of forming payment in the country as a whole. The employees receive various types of additional payment besides their salary on levels similar to those in the other sectors. The exception is made only by the payment for extra work and work on Sundays – in the sector the share of those who receive this remuneration is almost twice less than the average for the economy. Besides, in this sector there is reported an exceptionally small relative share of employees who have other non-financial perks.

On average, half of the labor in farming is done by unpaid workforce – almost 40% (14). The people employed in the sector accept their income as low. The feeling for poverty is strongly expressed. This poses serious challenges to the policy for development of agriculture.

The main parameter of the “payment for labor” is the regular payment of monthly remuneration. Paying salaries later can lead not only to strong

demotivation for work, it can result also in tension in the company. Such lateness means serious difficulties in the economic activity, financing or management. Another indicator for what exactly the income from labor is, is the payment of additional remuneration for extra work, work in harmful conditions and others. The lack of such payments and other non-financial perks, that are considered part of the salary and in practice make it bigger, increase the risk related to incomes.

As for the element “**Information and consulting**” the authors of the study “Working conditions in Bulgaria” point out that there is a high degree of information among those employed in the sector concerning the impact of work on their health and the risks at work, together with very bad situation related to the indicator for “consulting”. The work of the employees is seldom the topic of consulting and it is not rare that they do not have the chance to discuss issues in their work with their supervisors. The systems for information and consulting in the sector obviously need serious development.

Considering the last element “**work and life outside work**” farming is defined as a risky sector, even though this is not judged for all indicators. The general satisfaction with the working hours is the most important indicator for the element “work and life outside work”. It is exactly because the way of reaching a balance between work and personal life is strictly individual, that the subjective sense of satisfaction is the most significant indicator in the assessment.

Using intentional leaves of absence (for family reason, maternity leave, health issues and training) is also on a level above the average for the country. On the other hand, those employed in agriculture use their paid annual holidays much more seldom compared to the other sectors. Using paid annual holidays is a basic right of the employees. It provides employees with an opportunity for recreation and rest and thus – for keeping their ability to work for a longer period of time. Planning annual holidays guarantee a working atmosphere that is calm and without conflicts, it also lowers stress at work.

The volume and type of employees’ workload outside the working hours is vital for providing a balance between work and personal life. According to data of the MLSP (5) study about the element “Work and life outside work” the indicator “care for old and helpless relatives” has the highest values in agriculture. Judged on this indicator the sector has the highest risk.

Considering the above studied elements of the working conditions in agriculture we can make the following conclusions:

- The agricultural sector has the highest risk regarding the elements “type of work”, “payment for the work done” and “information and consulting”, it is less risky judged on the element “organisation of work” and there is no demonstrated risk judged on the the remaining elements.

- It is good to analyse the reasons for omissions and flaws in the work in order to improve the working conditions which will lead to higher quality of employment in farming and better economic welfare. Therefore, there need to be applied effective measures for achieving high-quality labor and organisation of work, high-quality management of human resources and high reliability of the measures providing employees’ health and life, as well as more investment in the quality of employment.

- The economic approach to improving the healthy and safe working conditions needs to include: specifying the price of accidents at work and professional illnesses both for the employers and the state, specifying the relation between the activity of enterprises and the issues concerning healthy and safe working conditions, use of economic benefits from improving the working conditions for solving other social tasks.

- Efficient socio-economic results can be achieved through carrying out a purposeful state policy in the field of working conditions.

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