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*The triple-win illusion:
temporary migration and cheap labour
in Japanese and Spanish agriculture*

Abstract

This article examines how state-managed temporary migration schemes in agriculture serve the structural imperative to secure cheap and controllable labour in core economies. Using a comparative case study of Spain and Japan within a world-ecology framework and the Most Different Systems Design approach in comparative politics, this analysis

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examines how distinct demographic trajectories, agrarian structures, and migration regimes nonetheless converge around similar logics of labour cheapening, mobility control, and socio-legal stratification. The study combines secondary literature, legal and policy documents, and statistical data to reconstruct the historical evolution, institutional design and social effects of Japan's TITP/SSW schemes and Spain's GECCO programme. The analysis shows that the celebrated "triple-win" framing functions primarily as a legitimising discourse: it presents highly asymmetric arrangements as mutually beneficial while masking their role in sustaining exploitative agricultural labour regimes. Despite divergent narratives and policy architectures, both cases generate temporary, segmented and politically manageable migrant workforces. The article concludes that agricultural migration policies in the global core are best understood as nationally specific articulations of a shared structural logic rooted in contemporary agro-capitalism.

Keywords: world-ecology, temporary migration programmes, agricultural labour, triple-win discourse, Spain and Japan

Introduction

Contemporary agri-food systems across the global core have become increasingly dependent on migrant labour (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a). Structural demographic transformations – most notably population ageing, rural depopulation, and the declining attractiveness of agricultural work among native workers – have intersected with major shifts in agricultural production, including industrialisation, flexibilisation, and spatial concentration of farming (López-Sala, 2016a). Together, these dynamics have generated a sustained and structural demand for a foreign workforce willing and able to perform arduous, low-paid, and highly seasonal tasks essential to maintaining food production at low cost (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016). This reliance on migrant labour is neither marginal nor temporary but a defining feature of contemporary agro-capitalist accumulation. In this context, the world-ecology perspective offers a useful lens to understand how the production of cheap food is structurally linked to the mobilisation of cheap labour (Moore, 2015), situating agricultural migration not as a peripheral phenomenon but as a central mechanism for sustaining the wider dynamics of capitalist accumulation (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2023).

While these structural pressures are broadly shared, states have developed markedly different strategies to secure agricultural labour. Some rely on the free circulation of workers within regional blocs, others tolerate various forms of irregularity, and many have institutionalised tightly controlled channels designed to recruit, discipline, and reproduce a compliant workforce (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025). Among these instruments, temporary migration programmes (TMPs) have gained singular prominence. TMPs are typically defined by strict temporariness and non-convertibility of permits, limited or no family reunification rights, employer-specific contracts tying legal status to one workplace, and recruitment mechanisms often embedded in bilateral agreements. Although their institutional forms vary, they share a common normative framing. Positioned as embodiments of "safe, orderly and regular

migration”, in line with the principles set out in the Global Compact for Migration (Pécoud, 2021) and thus aligning with the dominant global migration norm, they have been promoted as co-development tools (Macías Llaga et al., 2016). Central to this discourse is the celebrated “triple-win” formula, which promises simultaneous benefits for countries of origin, countries of destination and migrants themselves (Castles & Ozkul, 2014).

However, extensive research shows that the triple-win narrative functions less as an empirical description than as a legitimising slogan (Bauböck & Ruhs, 2022). Rather than serving all actors equitably, TMPs tend to prioritise the needs of employers and destination states by ensuring predictable inflows of low-cost, easily replaceable labour while tightly regulating migrant workers’ rights, autonomy, and mobility. Far from advancing development objectives, such schemes often reinforce dependency, constrain worker agency and compress labour costs to the maximum, facilitating the reproduction of global agri-food value chains (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025). From a world-ecology standpoint, this tension is not incidental: the triple-win narrative operates as an ideological device that obscures the structural function of TMPs within the broader dynamics of cheap food and cheap labour (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016). What remains less explicit in much of this debate is how this legitimising language travels across markedly different national settings, enabling programmes with distinct designs to converge on similar effects in agriculture: temporariness, segmentation, and political manageability.

This article contributes to this line of research by examining two highly disparate case studies – Spain and Japan – that share neither regional context nor key structural conditions. Precisely because of their profound geographical, demographic, economic, migratory, and agricultural differences, these cases offer an illuminating basis allowing to understand how temporary migration programmes, when we abstract from their specific design features, contextual configurations, operational dynamics and the discourses mobilised by the actors who promote them, reveal a common underlying function: the use of the triple-win narrative to legitimise a single core objective, namely, securing a workforce that is readily available, tightly subject to employer control, and kept at low cost. Empirically, the article advances the debate by placing Spain and Japan in a single comparative frame – a pairing rarely examined in research on agricultural labour migration.

Analysing Spain and Japan side by side is, therefore, analytically fruitful. Their structural dissimilarities make them maximally different cases, allowing us to observe how the same normative slogan – the triple win – can be mobilised to legitimise policy instruments that share a common structural function: ensuring the supply of inexpensive and politically manageable migrant labour for agricultural capital. This comparison thus allows us to assess how TMPs contribute to the dynamics of labour cheapening, mobility control and socio-legal stratification that underpin the agricultural sector in both countries. More broadly, by situating this comparison within the world-ecology framework (Moore, 2015), the article seeks to contribute to critical debates on the triple-win narrative, revealing how its rhetorical power masks the structural extraction of value that sustains contemporary agro-capitalism.

Building on these insights, the article pursues three objectives. First, it situates the Spanish and Japanese agricultural labour regimes within world-ecology, showing how their respective TMPs contribute to the production of cheap food and cheap labour as systemic requirements of capitalist accumulation. Second, it examines the political and institutional trajectories through which each state has operationalised and justified the triple-win discourse. Third, it compares the lived realities generated by these programmes, assessing their implications for migrant rights, employer power and labour market restructuring.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical approach, grounding the analysis in world-ecology and critical research on migration, labour, and agri-food systems. Subsequent sections present the Spanish and Japanese cases, examining both the historical evolution and the contemporary functioning of their respective programmes. The final section returns to the implications of this comparison for how temporary migration is legitimised and organised in core agri-food systems.

To situate this comparison, the following section outlines the structural and conceptual foundations of our argument, drawing on world-ecology and critical analyses of temporary migration to explain why securing cheap labour is indispensable for contemporary agricultural production.

Structural dynamics of migrant labour in the reproduction of agro-capitalism

The growing reliance on migrant labour in contemporary agriculture responds to a structural requirement of capitalist accumulation (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a). Capitalism depends on the continuous access to low-cost labour, food, energy, and raw materials, whose cheap reproduction underpins expansive accumulation cycles (Moore, 2015). Within this configuration, food plays a decisive role because it sets the lower bound of the cost of reproducing labour power: when food prices increase, wages must rise to secure social reproduction; when food remains cheap, wages can be contained without destabilising that reproduction (Moore, 2010). Keeping food inexpensive is therefore not a contingent preference but a systemic necessity, and the deployment of cheap, flexible migrant labour in agriculture is a central mechanism for achieving this objective (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2023).

Agriculture, therefore, plays a structurally indispensable role within the capitalist world-ecology: it is the sector responsible for producing the cheap food that underpins the global wage relation. Historically, different phases of capitalist accumulation relied on agrarian revolutions, colonial expansion, or technological innovations to secure cheap food (Moore, 2010). In the contemporary period, however, no new agricultural revolution has supplied a comparable leap in productivity (Patel, 2013). As a consequence, the systemic reproduction of cheap food increasingly rests on the massive exploitation of migrant labour in agricultural enclaves of the global core. Migrant workers have become essential for sustaining agro-capitalist accumulation by enabling food prices to remain low despite the structural forces that would otherwise drive them upwards (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016).

The comparison developed in this article makes this relationship visible by following, in each case, the concrete ways agricultural production is rendered viable under cost pressure. On the one hand, the analysis traces how agrarian restructuring, market positioning and policy priorities (e.g., export orientation, price competition, and “competitiveness” imperatives) intensify the drive to contain production costs. On the other hand, it examines how this pressure is managed through state-regulated labour programmes, the recruitment infrastructures that discipline workers, and the documented expansion of migrant incorporation in agriculture through policy sources and available statistics.

These dynamics do not operate in the abstract; they intersect with long-term demographic and socio-economic shifts that reshape both labour supply and the political management of farm work in core economies. This structural dependency converges with demographic and socio-economic shifts in high-income countries. Ageing populations, rural depopulation, and the declining attractiveness of agricultural work have drastically reduced the availability of local labour. As a result, states and employers across diverse contexts such as Canada, Spain, Japan, Australia, and Poland (see: Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a; Matuszczyk, 2024) have increasingly turned to migrant workers, who often accept demanding conditions due to wage differentials, precarious residence status or limited alternatives. This has generated a process of “migrantisation”, whereby migrants become a distinct and subordinated segment of the labour force structurally necessary for maintaining low production costs.

To ensure the availability and compliance of this labour force, states have developed different political-legal mechanisms, ranging from formal temporary migration programmes to tolerated irregularity or employer-driven recruitment systems. While these instruments vary in design, they serve a common purpose: guaranteeing a stable supply of cheap, flexible and easily disciplined workers, constraining worker agency and compressing labour costs. Core countries combine these strategies, adapting them to their historical trajectories and sectoral needs (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016).

Among the diverse mechanisms employed to secure this workforce, regular channels – particularly temporary migration programmes (TMPs) – occupy a central place. These schemes are promoted by states not only because they ensure a predictable and legally controlled inflow of workers but also because they align seamlessly with contemporary migration governance norms, particularly, the Global Compact for Migration. TMPs embody a model of mobility that is temporary, non-settling, and explicitly utilitarian: migrants are admitted solely to meet predefined labour shortages, remain tied to specific employers and sectors, and are obligated to return once their contracts expire. This architecture allows states to present themselves as managing migration responsibly – reducing irregularity, retaining full control over admission, and avoiding long-term incorporation – while offering employers a workforce whose legal status is conditional and therefore highly compliant (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025).

Central to the political appeal of these programmes is the celebrated “triple-win” formula (Castles & Ozkul, 2014). This narrative presents TMPs as instruments capable of generating mutual benefits for all actors involved: destination states efficiently fill labour shortages, origin states receive remittances and skills transfers, and migrants

gain temporary access to foreign labour markets and higher wages. Framed as a form of managed mobility that is orderly, temporary, and development-friendly, the triple win has become a powerful legitimising discourse in global migration politics. However, the academic literature has widely criticised this slogan for its reductionism and normativity (Money, 2025). Rather than offering an accurate description of how TMPs operate in practice, the triple-win narrative obscures the structural function these programmes fulfil: securing a cheap, flexible and tightly subordinated labour force whose position is shaped more by the needs of agro-capitalist production than by the developmental ambitions it ostensibly promotes.

The relevance of this critique becomes particularly clear when examining how states operationalise TMPs in practice. In Spain and Japan, the triple-win logic has been institutionalised through distinct mechanisms: the recruitment-at-source scheme (*Gestión Colectiva de Contrataciones en Origen – GECCO*), and in Japan, the long-standing Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), later complemented by the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) system. Although these instruments differ markedly in their design, genealogy, and political justification, they converge around the same structural imperative outlined above. Both regimes employ the triple-win discourse to legitimise programmes that, in practice, ensure the availability of a workforce that is cheap, disposable, and legally constrained.

Comparing Spain and Japan thus allows us to extend and refine this line of inquiry. Their profound contextual differences – historical, demographic, economic, migratory, and agricultural – make them maximally distinct cases. Precisely because they share neither institutional legacies nor socio-political environments, the fact that both have deployed TMPs guided by similar structural logics reinforces the argument that temporary migration programmes respond to deeper systemic imperatives rather than to context-specific needs. This comparison highlights how, beneath divergent narratives and institutional architectures, TMPs in both countries fulfil the same core function within the capitalist world-ecology: guaranteeing cheap and controlled labour for the sustained production of cheap food.

Methodology

This research employs a comparative case study approach, utilising the Most Different Systems Design (MDS) framework (Caramani, 2008). It examines how migrant workers are incorporated into the agricultural sectors of Spain and Japan, specifically through temporary migration programmes (TMPs). The objective is to analyse whether programmes developed in two maximally different contexts respond to a common underlying logic – namely, the structural requirement for cheap and subordinated labour identified in the world-ecology framework – and to contrast this with the legitimising discourses articulated through the triple-win narrative.

Following Lijphart's (1975) formulation, the comparative method tests whether empirical relationships between variables persist across contrasting contexts by maximising variation in control variables while maintaining similarity in the independent variable. MDS, therefore, selects cases that differ substantially in dimensions such as

economic structure, demographic composition, political institutions, geographical position, and cultural configurations, yet display convergence in the factors most relevant to the hypothesis.

In this study, the independent variable is the systemic need for cheap labour in the agricultural sectors of core economies. The hypothesis proposes that, despite profound contextual differences between Spain and Japan, both countries develop TMPs that operationalise similar underlying logics, even if their institutional designs diverge.

The construction of the cases involves examining the historical evolution, institutional design, operational functioning, and social consequences of Spain's GECCO programme and Japan's Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) scheme. To this end, the study draws on secondary literature, legal documents, policy reports, and statistical data. This material allows us to reconstruct a detailed picture of the contemporary configuration of TMPs in each setting and to analyse their implications for migrants, employers, and the broader agri-food system. Together, these sources support an empirically grounded assessment of whether the apparent divergence between the two regimes masks a shared structural function aligned with the systemic need for cheap labour.

The comparison focuses on two analytical dimensions. The first comprises contextual factors, including demographic developments such as population ageing and rural exodus, as well as productive structures that shape labour demand in each country's primary sector. The second concerns migration policies, defined here as the specific channels through which states regulate the entry, employment conditions, and mobility of migrant agricultural workers. By examining how these dimensions interact in the Spanish and Japanese cases, the analysis interrogates the extent to which the triple-win discourse functions as a legitimising device that conceals structurally exploitative labour arrangements.

A methodological limitation of this study relates to language. While all three authors are fluent in Spanish, the Spanish member of the team does not speak Japanese and, therefore, has limited direct access to Japanese-language academic literature and policy documents. However, this limitation is intrinsic to the challenge of comparing two highly heterogeneous contexts that have rarely been analysed jointly. The collaborative nature of the research team, which includes scholars with expertise on both countries, mitigates this constraint. Continuous discussions within the broader research project framework have ensured alignment of analytical objectives, contextual accuracy, and conceptual coherence. Rather than weakening the analysis, the binational composition of the team strengthens the comparative perspective by enabling a dialogue between insider and outsider viewpoints and by making explicit the epistemological difficulty of bridging distinct migration, labour, and agricultural regimes.

The second limitation concerns the nature of the empirical base. The article relies primarily on secondary scholarship, legal and policy documents, and statistical data. This supports a robust reconstruction of programme design, trajectories, and aggregate effects, but it also means that the analysis cannot capture in the same depth the micro-dynamics through which these regimes are enacted and contested on the ground – such as everyday workplace practices, informal negotiations, enforcement gaps, union

strategies, or the lived experience of mobility restrictions, debt, and dependency across different sites and seasons. While we draw on existing qualitative research and documented cases where available, future work could strengthen and refine these claims through primary fieldwork, including interviews with workers, employers, unions and policymakers, and/or multi-sited ethnographic research in key agricultural enclaves and recruitment settings.

Overall, the methodological strategy is designed to test whether Spain and Japan, despite their radical differences, converge around the same structural logics identified in the theoretical framework. By tracing how TMPs operate in practice and assessing their social effects, the comparison evaluates whether both cases substantiate the argument that temporary migration policies in the global core serve the systemic production of cheap labour rather than the mutual gains celebrated through the triple-win narrative.

To contextualise how these structural imperatives operate in practice, the analysis begins by examining the demographic and productive transformations shaping labour demand in both countries. Understanding these contextual dynamics is essential for assessing how Spain and Japan have come to rely on temporary migration programmes as a central mechanism for securing cheap and compliant agricultural labour.

Demographic shifts and agricultural transformation in Spain and Japan

Although Spain and Japan differ profoundly in their political, economic, and institutional configurations, both countries face structural pressures that make agriculture increasingly dependent on migrant labour. As outlined in the theoretical framework, the combination of demographic decline, rural depopulation, and labour-intensive agricultural systems has created persistent labour shortages that cannot be met domestically. These convergent pressures form the structural backdrop against which temporary migration programmes have become central mechanisms for securing cheap and flexible labour in both countries.

Japan's demographic and agrarian transformations illustrate the depth and persistence of labour shortages in its primary sector. With one of the world's oldest populations – 28.7% aged 65 or older in 2020, projected to rise to 38.7% by 2050 – the demographic crisis is particularly acute in rural areas (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022). The average age of agricultural workers reached 67 in 2022, and more than half of full-time farmers are now over 70 years old (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2023, p. 12). This ageing field population is compounded by a long-standing rural exodus: since the 1960s, younger generations have migrated to urban centres in search of higher wages and improved living standards, leaving behind communities struggling to maintain economic activity and productive capacity (Matanle & Rausch, 2011).

Japan's agricultural structure further intensifies these pressures. Farming is dominated by small, family-run holdings – more than 80% of farms operate on just 2.2 hectares on average – characterised by limited mechanisation, relatively low

productivity, and a strong reliance on supplementary non-agricultural income (OECD, 2022, p. 34). Government support, while extensive, has often reinforced these inefficiencies and has not resolved the succession crisis: many farms lack younger heirs, jeopardising the sector's long-term viability (Fuhrmann-Aoyagi et al., 2024).

Between 1990 and 2020, the number of agricultural workers decreased by half, from 2.2 million to 1.1 million, despite policy efforts to attract younger workers (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2023, p. 18). Agriculture remains unattractive to the majority due to low wages, physically demanding conditions, and limited prospects. These converging demographic and structural pressures have generated what Chiavacci (2025) terms a “dam break”, prompting a significant shift in Japan's traditionally restrictive stance on immigration. As a result, programmes such as the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and, more recently, the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) scheme have become essential tools for supplying the agricultural sector with a cheap and controllable labour force.

Spain faces similar demographic challenges, albeit shaped by different historical processes and agrarian structures. Like Japan, it is classified as a “super-aged” society, with over 21% of its population aged 65 or older (World Bank, 2025). This demographic burden is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where the agricultural workforce is ageing according to the most recent agrarian census; the average age of farm managers is 61.4, and two-thirds are above 55 (INE, 2020).

Three macrostructural transformations underpin Spain's reliance on migrant agricultural labour. First, Spain's accession to the European Union (EU) accelerated internal migration from rural areas to urban centres, further depleting the agricultural labour pool. Second, the European division of labour consolidated Spain's role as a major producer of fruit and vegetables for European markets, driving a rapid expansion of labour-intensive agricultural production. Third, the period coincided with Spain's transition from a country of emigration to one of immigration, creating a large supply of foreign workers who entered sectors – including agriculture – increasingly avoided by native workers due to low wages and demanding conditions (López-Sala, 2016b).

Unlike Japan's fragmented smallholder system, Spain's agricultural transformation since the 1990s has led to the development of extensive agro-industrial enclaves dominated by large companies operating under intensive production regimes. These enclaves rely on greenhouse agriculture, agrochemical inputs, and labour-intensive Fordist methods, all geared towards export markets (De Castro et al., 2017). Within this model, different production logics coexist: continuous-production enclaves offer year-round employment and require a relatively stable labour force, whereas seasonal enclaves – such as those producing berries or melons – depend heavily on mobile, short-term workers who can respond to highly concentrated harvest periods.

Despite these structural differences, both types of enclaves share a core: they rely on a cheap, flexible, and easily renewable labour force. This dependence has shaped the development of migration policies, with temporary migration programmes emerging as key instruments for managing labour supply in a way that satisfies both agricultural employers and the state's regulatory objectives (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025).

To understand how these structural pressures translate into concrete labour–migration regimes, the following section examines the policies through which Japan and Spain have incorporated migrant workers into their agricultural sectors. The analysis follows a common analytical structure for both countries, ensuring the case comparison: (1) the historical evolution and institutional trajectory of temporary migration programmes; (2) their legislative foundations and operational functioning; (3) the narratives and legitimising discourses that frame them; and (4) their social implications for workers and agricultural labour markets.

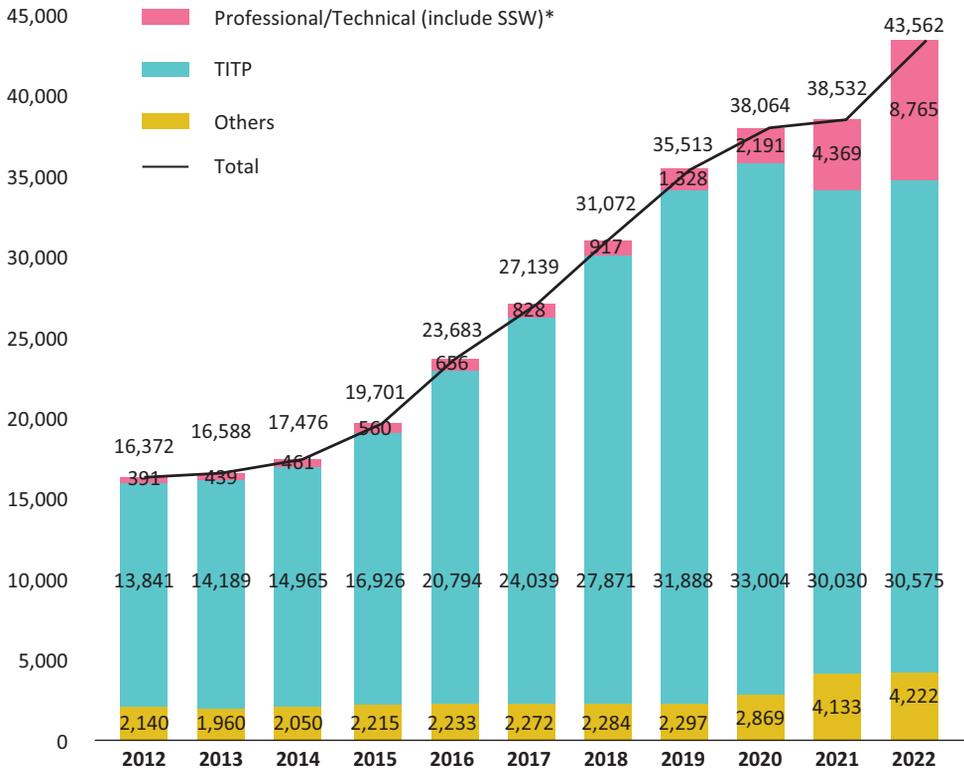
Migration policies in Japan and Spain: historical trajectories and institutional designs

Japan and Spain have developed distinct migration policy architectures to address labour shortages in their agricultural sectors. Despite their profound demographic, political and institutional differences, both countries have progressively institutionalised temporary migration programmes (TMPs) as central mechanisms for ensuring the availability of a cheap, flexible, and easily regulated workforce. Following the analytical structure outlined above, this section examines each case in a comparable manner, beginning with Japan.

Japan

Japan provides a particularly revealing illustration of how a state that has historically rejected the admission of foreign workers has gradually come to rely on migrant labour as a structural component of its agricultural sector. Since the 1960s, the Japanese government has upheld a political stance based on the exclusion of foreign labour recruitment, a position rooted in ethno-nationalist understandings of social cohesion and a preference for national workers. Only one early exception existed: a small seasonal worker programme in Okinawa – then transitioning from U.S. administration to Japanese sovereignty – which, between 1972 and 1977, temporarily employed South Korean workers in the pineapple and sugar industries (Hiraoka, 1992). Beyond this exceptional case, Japan’s migration policy remained officially closed for decades. However, the deepening demographic crisis, rural depopulation, and structural inefficiencies in agriculture progressively undermined the viability of a nationally sourced labour force. By the early 2000s, labour shortages had become so acute that the agricultural sector increasingly turned to foreign workers through two structured migration channels: the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and, more recently, the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa. Both programmes now function as essential sources of agricultural labour (Miyairi, 2022).

Figure 1. Number of Foreign Workers in the Japanese Agricultural Sector (Total, TITP, SSW, 2012–2022)



Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2023.

The TITP, introduced to agriculture in 1992, was officially framed as a skills-transfer initiative designed to support development in sending countries by allowing foreign nationals to train in Japanese companies. In practice, the programme quickly evolved into a mechanism through which employers could access a cheap and highly controllable workforce. Over the years, the TITP expanded in scope and duration, allowing interns to remain in Japan for up to five years through a progression from TITP1 to TITP2 and TITP3. Participation increased steadily: in 2022, there were more than 320,000 interns across various sectors, with around 9% working in agriculture and predominantly originating from Southeast Asia (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022). A series of legislative reforms – most notably the 2009 revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act and the 2017 Technical Intern Training Act – sought to improve oversight, recognising interns as workers subject to labour law after an initial training period and creating the Organisation for Technical Intern Training (OTIT) to supervise the system. Yet, these reforms did not address the structural vulnerabilities. TITP interns often face high recruitment debts, unpaid

wages, long working hours, confiscation of passports, and limited mobility, outcomes that contradict the programme's developmental rhetoric and expose its function as a labour-supply device rather than a genuine training scheme (Liu-Farrer, 2020).

Table 1. Total number of foreign workers in the Japanese agricultural workforce (2015–2022)

Year	Foreign Workers
2015	19,776
2016	23,776
2017	27,248
2018	31,072
2019	35,513
2020	38,064
2021	38,532
2022	43,562

Source: Survey on the Employment Situation of Foreign Workers (2023) (*before 2017 includes the forestry sector).

Table 2. Nationality of TITP workers in the agricultural sector, Japan (2022)

Country	Number of Workers
Vietnam	15,631
China	7,765
Philippines	5,169
Indonesia	6,320
Cambodia	3,083
Thailand	1,912
Myanmar	1,175
Others	2,103

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2023.

In 2019, the Japanese government introduced the SSW visa, marking a significant shift in migration policy. Unlike the TITP, which relied on an ambiguous discourse of training and technical cooperation, the SSW programme openly acknowledged the need to recruit foreign workers to fill labour shortages. The SSW offers two visa categories: SSW1, which allows stays of up to five years in sectors such as agriculture, and SSW2, which, in select sectors, permits long-term residence and potential pathways to permanent residency (Maclachlan & Shimizu, 2022). SSW workers enjoy greater autonomy than TITP interns, including the ability to change employers within the same industry. By 2023, more than 200,000 SSW workers were employed in Japan; around 23,000 of them (11%) worked in agriculture, largely from Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Notably, over 70% of agricultural SSW workers previously

participated in the TITP, revealing how the two systems operate in a sequential and complementary fashion rather than as separate pathways.

Table 3. Number of SSW1 and SSW2 workers in the agricultural sector (2019–2023)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
SSW1	292	2,387	6,232	16,459	23,861
SSW2	–	–	–	–	21

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2024.

Table 4. Nationality of SSW1 and SSW2 workers in the agricultural sector (2023)

Country	Number of Workers	%
Vietnam	8,002	33.5
Indonesia	6,743	28.3
Philippines	2,495	10.5
Cambodia	2,294	9.6
China	2,009	8.4
Thailand	905	3.8
Nepal	563	2.4
Myanmar	437	1.8
Others	413	1.7
Total	23,861	100

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2024.

Despite these reforms, Japan has continued to maintain the public rhetoric that its migration programmes are not immigration schemes. Official terminology, such as “skills transfer”, “international cooperation”, or “human resource development”, has long been used to present foreign workers not as labourers but as temporary trainees, thereby mitigating anti-immigration sentiments and justifying a migration regime designed to deliver a cheap and tightly regulated workforce. The celebrated triple-win discourse – proclaiming mutual benefits for workers, sending countries and Japan – has played a crucial legitimising role in this process, enabling the state to reconcile the growing structural dependence on foreign labour with an official stance that rejects immigration (Gunji, 2021).

The introduction of the Training-based Employment System (TES) in 2024 ostensibly shifts the policy frame from “training” to “securing human resources”. However, this transition risks remaining cosmetic. Crucially, strictly controlled mobility – a defining feature of unfree labour – persists. While the new system nominally permits job transfers (*tenseki*) after one to two years, strict prerequisites regarding Japanese language proficiency and the practical difficulty of finding new sponsors in rural areas effectively bind workers to their initial employers. Thus, the TES likely preserves the structural vulnerability inherent in the TITP, prioritising employer retention over genuine worker autonomy.

These developments reveal a clear trajectory. Japan's agricultural labour regime has progressively shifted from a formal rejection of immigration towards an institutional architecture that depends on foreign workers, while simultaneously deploying legitimising narratives that obscure this dependence. The system's successive iterations – Trainee visas, TITP, SSW, and now TES – have varied in their discursive framing but converged around the same function: ensuring the availability of cheap, flexible, and politically manageable labour essential to sustaining agricultural production under the structural pressures described in the world-ecology framework. Whether future economic growth in origin countries or domestic political pressures will reshape Japan's reliance on these programmes remains uncertain. What is evident is that the legitimacy of the system continues to depend heavily on narratives such as the triple win, which reconcile the state's ideological reluctance to recognise immigration with its material need for foreign labour.

Building on this structural reading, the social effects generated by Japan's agricultural migration regime further reveal how its programmes operate in practice. Beneath the rhetoric of cooperation and mutual benefit, the TITP, SSW, and emerging TES systems produce a labour force whose vulnerability is embedded within the very architecture of these schemes. Migrant workers frequently enter Japan through costly recruitment channels that generate significant debt, binding them to employers and limiting their capacity to contest exploitative conditions. Once in the workplace, restrictions on job mobility, bureaucratic dependence on supervising organisations, and linguistic barriers reinforce a regime of subordination that normalises long hours, low wages, and limited protections. Reports of harassment, wage theft and excessive control over daily life illustrate how the system cultivates the docility and disposability of workers while maintaining the appearance of regulated, development-oriented migration. For some migrants, the only escape from these constraints is to abandon the formal programme and seek irregular employment, where returns may be higher but legal vulnerability increases (Sunai, 2024). Taken together, these dynamics underscore the structural contradiction at the heart of Japan's model: programmes framed as vehicles of skills transfer and triple-win development systematically generate conditions of precarity and dependence that sustain the agricultural sector's need for cheap and tightly regulated labour.

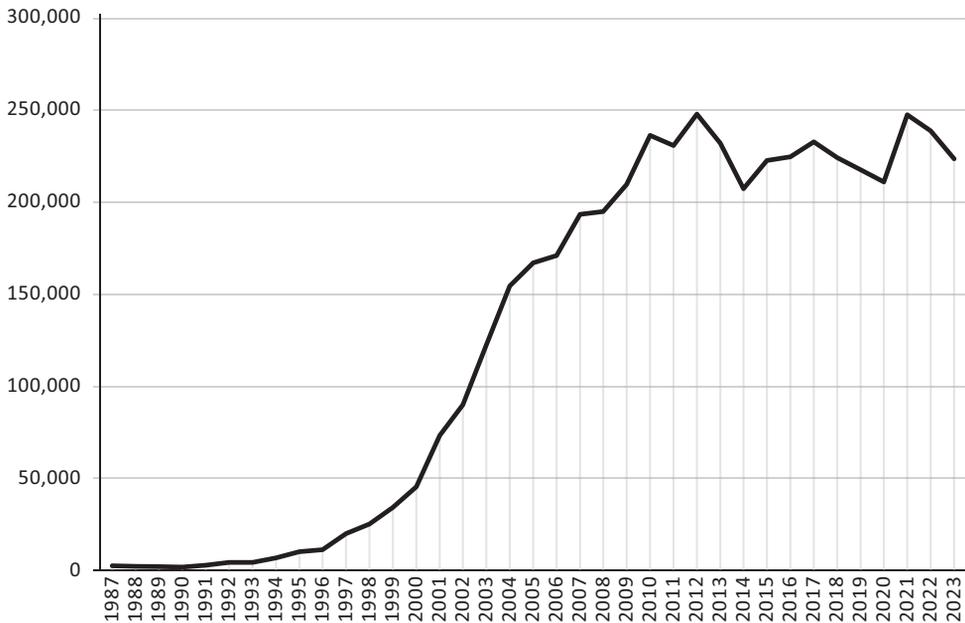
While the Japanese case illustrates how demographic decline, agricultural restructuring, and state-managed migration channels converge to produce a highly controlled and structurally subordinated foreign workforce, Spain presents a markedly different historical and institutional trajectory. Yet, as in Japan, the agricultural sector's reliance on migrant labour has been shaped by comparable pressures arising from the need to sustain low-cost food production within the broader dynamics of agro-capitalism. Examining the Spanish case through the same analytical lens makes it possible to identify how divergent political economies, legal frameworks, and agricultural models nonetheless generate migration regimes that fulfil equivalent structural functions. It is to this second case that the analysis now turns.

Spain

Spain presents an agricultural migration trajectory markedly different from Japan's, yet shaped by analogous structural pressures arising from the need to sustain cheap food production within a global ecological framework. The Spanish agricultural sector has relied on three complementary channels to secure migrant labour: (1) the employment of irregular migrants, (2) recruitment through EU free mobility, and (3) GECCO, the state-led temporary migration programme. GECCO is the functionally comparable scheme to the Japanese programmes. Although other channels significantly shape labour supply, their logic and operation differ substantially from temporary migration programmes and therefore fall outside the analytical scope of this section. However, a holistic picture of the migrantisation phenomenon (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a) is needed to understand how GECCO is situated within the Spanish framework.

The historical evolution of migrant incorporation in Spanish agriculture illustrates how structural transformations created an acute dependence on foreign labour. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the expansion of agro-industrial enclaves – particularly in Andalusia, Catalonia, and Murcia – coincided with rural depopulation and internal migration to cities, drastically reducing the availability of local agricultural labour. As production intensified, especially in export-oriented horticulture, the number of migrants employed in agriculture grew exponentially, reaching, as shown in Figure 2, almost 250,000 active workers in 2021, approximately one quarter of the sector's labour force.

Figure 2. Active workers of foreign origin in the Spanish agricultural sector during the period 1987–2023



Source: Labour Force Survey (EPA).

This labour demand was initially met through a model based on tolerated irregularity, a state-mediated form of deregulation that differs notably from the Japanese context (Avallone, 2017). Whereas Japan's insular geography and strict border regimes make irregular entry and employment rare, Spain experienced widespread recruitment of irregular migrants throughout the 1990s. Employers operating in isolated agricultural enclaves could easily conceal undeclared work, and the absence of effective enforcement made irregular hiring a low-risk, low-cost strategy. Although the number has decreased over time, estimates suggest that around 9% of all agricultural migrants were still irregular by 2020, though (Fanjul & Gálvez-Iniesta, 2020). Irregular workers were useful but not ideal: their limited returnability, higher likelihood of protest, and the existence of periodic regularisations (such as *arraigo*) made them insufficiently controllable. This very instability prompted agricultural employers – particularly in Huelva and Lleida – to demand a more orderly mechanism for securing a disciplined seasonal workforce, paving the way for the creation of GECCO (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b).

GECCO was created at the end of the 1990s, inspired by Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) (Hennebry & Preibisch 2012) and sharing features with other global TMPs such as New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a). From the outset, the programme reproduced the defining characteristics of temporary migration: short-term employment (up to 9 months), compulsory return, employer-specific contracts, prohibition of family reunification, and the possibility of circularity through repeat recruitment. These features mirror the conditionality and mobility restrictions of Japan's TITP and SSW, though Spain's emphasis on strict seasonality differentiates GECCO from the more continuous labour incorporation permitted under Japan's SSW2. GECCO's application quickly concentrated in seasonal monoculture enclaves – particularly Huelva (strawberry production) and Lleida (pome fruit) – where short, intensive harvest cycles made a tightly regulated seasonal workforce particularly attractive (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b).

During its initial expansion (1999–2008), GECCO evolved rapidly. Pilot collaborations with various origin countries yielded uneven results, but the programme grew substantially in Huelva and Lleida, initially recruiting workers from Poland and Eastern Europe. After these countries joined the EU in 2004, recruitment shifted toward Romania and Morocco. The magnitude and composition of the flows during this phase are reflected in the following recruitment data:

Table 5. Temporary worker recruitment through GECCO in Huelva province (up to 2007/2008)

Countries	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008
Bulgaria	0	0	0	508	604	941	3,021	4,656
Colombia	0	149	177	105	82	8	22	11
Ecuador	0	0	15	8	64	26	12	14
Philippines	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	270
Morocco	198	336	95	620	1,094	2,330	5,277	13,600
Poland	540	4,954	7,535	8,506	7,361	9,796	0	0
Romania	0	970	4,178	10,589	13,186	19,153	20,710	20,634
Senegal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	749
Ukraine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	557
TOTAL	738	6,409	12,000	20,336	22,391	32,254	29,042	40,491

Source: Macías Llaga et al. (2016).

The 2008 financial crisis, which hit Spain harder than Japan, transformed this trajectory. Unemployment soared, and the government drastically reduced GECCO quotas, attempting to redirect unemployed Spaniards into the agricultural sector. However, poor working conditions discouraged domestic workers from entering the sector. Employers responded by recruiting Romanians – now EU citizens free from third-country migration controls – through private mechanisms that imitated GECCO’s structure but operated outside state sponsorship (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2018). As a result, official GECCO numbers dropped sharply while Romanian employment surged, as shown below:

Table 6. Hiring Romanian workers in Huelva and number of GECCO authorisations during the period 2009–2016

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Contracts to Romanian workers	28,703	34,309	36,520	31,470	31,980	45,863	50,422	49,982
GECCO contracts	5,450	5,300	5,044	3,261	2,963	2,834	2,767	5,562

Sources: Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal (SEPE) (2024) and Subdirección General de Gestión y Coordinación de Flujos Migratorios (2023).

After the crisis, the programme entered a phase of “reactivation” (2017–present). GECCO no longer regained its pre-2008 scale but stabilised as a key mechanism for Huelva’s agricultural sector. Two developments characterised this period. First, recruitment concentrated almost exclusively in Morocco, increasing vulnerability to geopolitical tensions and border closures, a fragility exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic when travel restrictions disrupted labour arrivals. Second, the government initiated pilot tests with Honduras, Ecuador and Senegal to diversify origin countries. Recruitment data for this period reflect these changes:

Table 7. Total number of GECCO authorisations and breakdown by nationality of participants during the period 2017–2022

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Colombia	657	854	851	398	780	862
Ecuador	–	–	–	–	221	143
Honduras	–	–	–	–	241	633
Morocco	16,876	16,447	18,088	14,639	13,123	16,786
Senegal	10	–	48	–	–	141
TOTAL	17,543	17,301	18,987	15,037	14,365	18,565

Source: Subdirección General de Gestión y Coordinación de Flujos Migratorios (2023).

Although GECCO workers make up only about 6% of Spain’s agricultural labour force, and EU free mobility (especially Romanian and Bulgarian workers) supplies a much larger share, GECCO’s analytical significance outweighs its statistical weight: it functions as a normative anchor, setting benchmarks for labour disciplining, cost suppression, and flexible subordination that shape conditions even for formally deregulated EU-mobile workers. Juxtaposing GECCO with Japan’s TITP/SSW schemes, which together provide almost all foreign labour in Japanese agriculture, thus reveals a convergence in the political ideal of agricultural labour explicitly sought by the state, despite the differing quantitative reliance on these specific programmes. Their weight in the sector is shown below.

Table 8. Number of registered contracts in agriculture in Spain per nationality in 2022

Country	Number of Registered Contracts
Morocco	396,367
Romania	211,918
Senegal	82,931
Mali	74,209
Ecuador	29,812
Bulgaria	29,576
Pakistan	25,947
Algeria	24,083
Gambia	19,155
Bolivia	14,796
National Total	2,246,236

Source: Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal (SEPE) (2024).

The discursive framing surrounding GECCO strongly parallels Japan’s legitimising narratives. Spanish authorities and employers have consistently presented GECCO as a model of orderly, cooperative, and mutually beneficial migration, highlighting its

contribution to development in origin countries and portraying its circular structure as preventing settlement while meeting labour needs (López-Sala, 2016a; Macías Llaga et al., 2016). This rhetoric aligns with global triple-win logics and closely resembles Japan's emphasis on "international cooperation", "skills transfer", and "manageable migration". Yet, as in the Japanese case, the contrast between discourse and lived reality is stark.

The social implications of GECCO reveal a system that, despite its developmental veneer, embeds workers in structures of dependence, subordination, and vulnerability. Recruitment in origin prioritises workers – particularly women – perceived as "returnable" and compliant. Once in Spain, many face isolated rural housing, limited mobility, linguistic barriers, and patriarchal oversight that restrict daily autonomy. Reports (see: Ruiz-Ramírez et al., 2024) have documented excessive working hours, wage theft, degrading living conditions, and intimidation practices linking future recruitment to silence and acquiescence. Workers have also denounced sexual harassment, racialised treatment, and the use of deportability as a form of discipline. As in Japan, some workers view GECCO as an important income opportunity, yet this does not negate the structural contradiction inherent to the programme: a scheme celebrated as co-developmental and mutually beneficial consistently produces exploitable labour under conditions that sustain agricultural competitiveness through cost compression. The parallels with the Japanese case highlight how, despite different institutional pathways and geopolitical contexts, temporary migration programmes in both countries ultimately fulfil the same structural function within contemporary agro-capitalism: securing a cheap, flexible, and politically manageable workforce under a legitimising discourse of win-win cooperation.

Taken together, the Japanese and Spanish cases reveal how two agricultural systems, shaped by profoundly different histories, institutions, and demographic trajectories, have nonetheless converged on structurally (but not superficially) similar mechanisms for securing migrant labour. Each has developed a distinct set of temporary migration programmes, embedded in specific political economies and legitimised through context-dependent narratives, yet both ultimately reproduce a workforce that is temporary, segmented, and tightly regulated. These convergences invite a comparative discussion that moves beyond the particularities of each regime to interrogate how temporary migration programmes operate within the broader dynamics of world-ecology. By placing both cases in dialogue, the following section examines the logics, functions and effects that underpin their apparent similarities, highlighting the role of the triple-win narrative as a shared legitimising device and exploring the implications of these findings for the global organisation of agro-capitalist production.

The "triple-win" paradigm: a critical examination through the Japanese and Spanish cases

The comparative analysis of Japan and Spain reveals that, despite their radically different institutional architectures, demographic trajectories, and migration regimes,

both countries have constructed temporary migration systems that respond to the same underlying structural necessity: securing a cheap, disciplined, and disposable labour force to sustain agro-industrial production. The MDS approach applied here – comparing two cases that diverge across almost every conventional variable but share a similar position within global economic hierarchies – reveals that what appear as national specificities are largely cosmetic adaptations to a common structural imperative embedded in the capitalist world-ecology. Once these contextual and discursive layers are stripped away, a striking convergence emerges: both countries organise migration around the same material logic, while legitimising it through analogous normative repertoires rooted in the triple-win paradigm.

This convergence reinforces the broader argument that contemporary states in the global core face a systemic need to guarantee the production of cheap food, a requirement central to sustaining the cheap labour on which capitalist accumulation depends (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2023). Japan and Spain exemplify how demographic ageing, rural depopulation and the declining attractiveness of agricultural work intersect with agro-industrial restructuring to create chronic labour shortages that cannot be resolved domestically. The result is a structural reliance on foreign workers, irrespective of political ideology, migration tradition or cultural self-perceptions regarding immigration.

It is within this shared structural necessity that the triple-win discourse acquires its political function. The concept now constitutes the hegemonic normative language of global migration governance (Pécoud, 2021). In a constructivist sense, it operates as an international behavioural script (Winston, 2023) promoted by intergovernmental organisations and codified in frameworks such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Both Japan and Spain align themselves with this global norm: in Japan, through narratives of “skills transfer”, “international cooperation”, and advancement of partner countries; in Spain, through the rhetoric of “co-development”, “orderly migration”, and agricultural “essentiality”. Despite their different vocabularies, both sets of narratives frame temporary migration as generating simultaneous benefits for migrants, origin states, and destination states, presenting the programmes as consensual, developmental, and socially harmonious. Crucially, these narratives help neutralise anti-immigration sensitivities and present foreign labour recruitment as responsible statecraft rather than an economically driven necessity (Pécoud, 2015).

Yet the comparative analysis exposes the profound limitations of this discourse. The triple-win does not originate or guide these schemes; rather, it is mobilised after the fact to legitimise policy choices shaped by the material demand for cheap labour. In both Japan and Spain, temporary migration programmes are best understood not as developmental tools but as instruments of migratory utilitarianism, in Sayad’s (2004) sense: mechanisms that reduce migrants to labour units whose legitimacy derives exclusively from their productive utility. Japan’s TITP, for example, is officially framed as a skills-training mechanism, but its deployment in labour-intensive agricultural tasks reveals the emptiness of this justification. Fruit picking, greenhouse work or vegetable sorting do not generate transferable skills that would enable developmental returns in origin countries. A similar contradiction is visible in the Spanish GECCO programme, where discourses of co-development (Macías Llaga et al., 2016) sit uneasily alongside

the reality of repetitive, low-skilled seasonal tasks that provide little beyond temporary income.

The developmental claims associated with triple-win programmes do not withstand empirical scrutiny. Their size, temporality, and low wage levels make it impossible for them to generate substantial socio-economic transformations in their countries of origin. GECCO is the only programme with a strictly circular structure, and even there, the impact is limited to modest remittances. TITP and SSW flows are larger, but their remittance potential is constrained by high indebtedness, low wages and controlled mobility. Ultimately, migrants may experience micro-level benefits, but these are insufficient to produce the structural developmental outcomes implied by the triple-win narrative.

A materialist reading clarifies who truly benefits. The greatest gains accrue to destination-country agricultural sectors and the businesses that rely on seasonal and low-skilled labour to maintain profitability in competitive global markets. The state also benefits by securing food production, supporting export sectors, and avoiding the social costs of permanent immigration. For migrants and sending countries, however, benefits remain partial and precarious. The paradox is clear: for a genuine triple-win outcome to exist, workers would need higher wages, stronger labour rights and greater autonomy. Yet granting these improvements would undermine the very purpose of these schemes – namely, to provide employers with a cheap, tightly regulated and politically manageable workforce.

At the same time, convergence in outcomes should not obscure meaningful divergences in how each regime produces discipline and “manageability.” First, the two systems are embedded in different broader labour supply ecologies. In Spain, GECCO operates alongside EU free mobility and a historically significant (if shifting) presence of irregularised labour; this plurality gives employers alternative recruitment channels and makes GECCO function as a selective, state-backed mechanism geared to “returnability” and benchmark-setting. In Japan, by contrast, the relative marginality of irregular entry and the long-standing political refusal of “immigration” concentrate dependence on formal schemes (TITP/SSW and successor reforms), making the programme architecture itself the principal route through which agriculture secures foreign labour.

Second, the institutional idioms of temporariness differ in ways that shape workers’ trajectories. GECCO is explicitly seasonal and circular, with tight coupling between short contracts, mandatory return, and repeat recruitment; control is exercised through selection at origin and the conditional promise of being “called back”. Japan’s TITP normalises longer stays under a training rationale and channels workers through supervising organisations, while SSW partially relaxes job mobility and, in limited form, introduces the possibility of longer-term residence in certain tracks. These differences matter analytically because they generate distinct forms of dependency: Spain foregrounds circularity and deportability through return requirements; Japan foregrounds debt-financed recruitment, institutional brokerage, and the practical constraints that limit mobility even when nominally permitted.

Third, the political work performed by the triple-win discourse is context-specific. In Japan, it has been central to reconciling labour importation with an official stance

that rejects immigration, channelling admission through the language of “training,” “cooperation”, and “human resource development”. In Spain, where immigration is not denied in the same way, the discourse serves a different purpose: it helps stabilise a selective and externally managed seasonal channel amid public controversy over labour conditions, while signalling “orderly migration” to European and domestic audiences.

This contradiction lies at the heart of both the Japanese and Spanish models. Their differences – whether framed as skills transfer, co-development, essentiality or international cooperation – constitute what can be described as “policy folklore”: nationally specific discursive veneers that obscure the fundamental structural equivalence between the two systems. When analysed through the lens of world-ecology and comparative political economy, the programmes in both countries reveal an almost identical functional logic. Temporary migration is not designed to generate mutual benefit but to sustain agro-capitalism’s demand for cheap food and cheap labour. The triple-win narrative, therefore, operates less as a description of reality than as an ideological device that legitimises restrictive mobility regimes and masks the exploitative dynamics they reproduce. Unless this discourse is critically dismantled, the exploitation inherent in these programmes is likely to persist as a defining feature rather than an unintended consequence of contemporary agricultural labour regimes.

Conclusions

This article has shown that, despite their institutional, historical and cultural divergences, Japan and Spain have developed agricultural migration regimes that converge around a shared structural function: securing a cheap, flexible, and politically manageable labour force to sustain agro-industrial production. By analysing two maximally different cases through a world-ecology lens, the article contributes to a growing body of scholarship showing that temporary migration programmes in the global core are less the product of national specificities than the expression of a broader systemic logic rooted in the capitalist imperative to maintain cheap food and cheap labour. What appear as distinct policy trajectories or culturally grounded narratives are, in material terms, variations of a common organisational grammar.

The comparative evidence underscores that the triple-win narrative – whether articulated through Japan’s language of skills transfer and international cooperation or Spain’s vocabulary of co-development and orderly migration – functions primarily as a legitimising device. Far from guiding policy design, these discourses serve to reconcile the political contradictions of importing foreign labour while denying the permanence of migration, presenting temporary schemes as mutually beneficial when their foundational purpose is to guarantee labour cost compression. The analysis of TITP, SSW, and GECCO illustrates that, beneath their discursive veneers, these programmes reproduce structurally similar configurations of precarity, dependency and restricted mobility that underpin agro-capitalist accumulation. In this sense, the triple win is often framed in the register of social policy – a moral language of fairness, mutual benefit, and “responsible” governance – yet in practice, it functions largely as

a legitimising slogan. If the benchmark is shifted from administrative “orderliness” to the kinds of protections that social policy is meant to secure, the limitations of the triple win become clearer. As Matuszczyk and Duszczuk (2018) argue, a social-policy perspective on labour migration foregrounds labour-market security – encompassing the predictability of employment and income, as well as protection against avoidable risks – rather than merely regulating cross-border mobility. Similarly, research on migrants’ exposure to unemployment and welfare gaps in “sub-protective” regimes demonstrates how outcomes depend on the institutional configurations of labour markets and social protection, rather than the voluntaristic language of “choice” and mutual benefit (Valadas et al., 2018). From this angle, the triple-win would only warrant a social-policy status if programme design were assessed – and re-engineered – against concrete improvements in migrants’ life chances and enforceable rights, rather than against employers’ labour-supply needs and the state’s legitimacy claims.

By bringing these two cases into dialogue, the article reveals that their differences are largely superficial – policy “folklore” shaped by domestic political constraints, administrative traditions, and geopolitical considerations – while their underlying logic is fundamentally aligned. This insight strengthens the argument that agricultural migration cannot be fully understood through national migration frameworks alone. Instead, it must be situated within the global dynamics that bind the production of cheap food to the mobilisation of cheap labour, and which push states, regardless of ideology or geography, to construct migration regimes that prioritise economic utility over worker rights. Precisely because the structural mandate is cheap food, any attempt to reframe TMPs as genuine social policy will run into a built-in contradiction: measures that would make programmes socially protective – higher wages, effective freedom to change employers, enforceable housing standards, access to complaint mechanisms without retaliation, and meaningful pathways to secure residence – tend to raise labour costs and weaken employer control. The point is not that reform is impossible, but that the “triple-win” cannot become social policy without redistributing power and costs within agri-food systems.

The analysis also suggests that the triple-win discourse should not be understood as purely top-down. While states and international organisations supply its language, other actors receive and rework it in practice. Employers often employ a triple-win rhetoric strategically to present recruitment as both ethical and necessary, even when their competitive position depends on cost compression. Local authorities may mobilise the same vocabulary to justify seasonal governance arrangements (housing, transport, policing) that keep harvest systems running while containing social conflict. For migrants, however, the triple win is rarely a framework they actively mobilise or a language that features prominently in their own imaginings. Its relevance is more indirect: by dressing recruitment in the idiom of “orderly” mobility, training, and mutual benefit, the discourse can confer a veneer of legitimacy and even social prestige on participation, making programmes appear safer, more reputable, or more future-oriented than informal alternatives. Yet this attractiveness does not imply ownership of the narrative; migrants may enter primarily for pragmatic reasons and then confront, in practice, the gap between the official moral framing and the constraints and asymmetries embedded in the programmes. Attending to these receptions does not

redeem the discourse, but it clarifies how its moral appeal helps stabilise regimes that are experienced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted on the ground.

These findings open several avenues for future research. First, further comparative work is needed to examine how temporary migration programmes in other core agricultural economies respond to the same structural imperatives while adopting distinct normative vocabularies. Second, more attention should be devoted to understanding the political implications of positive migration narratives – such as the triple win – in sustaining exploitative labour conditions by masking the structural asymmetries on which agricultural production depends. Third, in an international context increasingly marked by restrictive migration agendas – as suggested by recent developments in Japan and the growing possibility of similar shifts in Spain – it is necessary to investigate whether the triple-win narrative will continue to function as a legitimising shield or whether states will move toward more overtly control-oriented discourses that leave exploitation less concealed but no less central to agricultural labour regimes.

A cautious way to think beyond critique is to ask what alternative arrangements would look like if temporary migration were treated not only as labour-market management but as social policy. At minimum, this would imply de-linking residence from a single employer, strengthening collective representation and enforcement capacity in agricultural enclaves, ensuring rights to organise and access remedies without jeopardising re-hire, and setting binding standards for recruitment fees, transport and housing – so that “orderly migration” is measured in lived security rather than administrative compliance. More ambitious alternatives would require shifting costs away from workers and onto value-chain actors through mechanisms such as sectoral wage floors that reflect social reproduction, joint liability across contractors and lead firms, and procurement rules that internalise decent-labour costs.

At the same time, the structural barriers are substantial. Retail price competition, fragmented subcontracting, and the political preference for “non-settling” labour all incentivise employers and states to preserve a disposable workforce. Under these conditions, the triple-win persists precisely because it offers a morally resonant vocabulary that can be invoked without confronting the distributional conflict implied by genuine social policy. Making that conflict visible – between cheap food as a systemic imperative and migrant protection as social policy – clarifies what is politically at stake in contemporary agricultural migration governance.

Ultimately, dismantling the legitimising power of the triple-win paradigm is essential for moving toward labour regimes that acknowledge, rather than conceal, the centrality of migrant workers in sustaining global food systems. Without confronting the structural drivers that generate demand for cheap labour, reforms will remain partial, and exploitation is likely to persist as an entrenched feature of contemporary agro-capitalism. The Japanese and Spanish cases remind us that meaningful change requires not only policy adjustments but a critical rethinking of the economic model that makes such programmes indispensable.

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