



# Covid-19 as a Career Shock: Towards a Sustainable Career for Migrant Workers in the Dutch Warehouse Distribution Sector

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Prepared by Kornélia Anna Kerti, Brigitte Kroon, Inge Bleijenbergh, Charissa Freese, Marloes van Engen

# SITUATION

## CAREERS OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN WAREHOUSES

Warehousing is an essential part of logistics, one of the top sectors in which The Netherlands excels and strives to be a global leader. To meet the growing demand for unskilled labor in the sector (e.g. order picking), temporary agencies recruit many workers from the Central and Eastern Member States of the European Union. Figures show that approximately 70-80 percent of CEE migrants work in low paid jobs in the Netherlands (Inspectie SZW, 2021), while most of them are employed on flexible or temporary agency contracts, which also reflects in the labor population in warehouses. The ABU estimates that in 2018, CEE migrant workers in the Dutch warehouse distribution sector contributed 314 million euros to the Dutch GDP (ABU, 2018).

Working conditions in warehouses are characterized by physically demanding work and time pressure (Kerti & Kroon, 2020). Often, migrant workers face multiple dependencies on their employer for earning an income, since temporary agencies also provide their accommodation and transportation to work. This leads to a precarious life situation, characterized by "instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social and economic vulnerability" (Rodgers, 1989, p. 3). Suboptimal work conditions make many CEE migrant workers struggle to achieve a sustainable career, which is defined as the dynamic sequence of career events shaped by individual choices over time and across social places, leading to work that gives purpose to an individual's life (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; Di Fabio, 2018). Navigating a sustainable career involves mobilizing resources. These include object resources (physical entities, e.g. accommodation or transportation), condition resources (social circumstances, e.g. social network ties or language skills), personal resources (personal characteristics, e.g. determination) and energy resources (things you need to obtain other resources, e.g. money or knowledge) (Hobfoll, 2001). Many of these resources are scarcely available for Central and Eastern European migrant workers.

## ERIKA, A HUNGARIAN MIGRANT WORKER



Erika - a Hungarian mother of two - moved to The Netherlands through a transnationally operating temporary agency, after 20 years of work experience in low-skilled employment in Hungary. While as a single mother, she made this decision to be able to financially support her family, she also wanted to "start a new life with new people". Erika's first job was in the Dutch greenhouse horticulture sector, which, in her own words, was not only "back-breaking work", but "there were [also] some problems with the salary". After hearing about an opportunity through her social network, Erika found a new position as an order picker in the warehouse distribution sector of the food industry, through a temporary agency. Erika was provided housing by the temporary agency in a bungalow park, a few kilometers away from her workplace. Initially, Erika was required to work seven days a week as an order picker. The lack of time for recovery negatively affected her life outside of work: "There isn't really private life here. There is work and sleep". After a while, she could take one day off a week to get some time for recovery. In the warehouse, there was a picking quota that workers needed to reach within the first few hours of their shift, otherwise they were sent home. While Erika almost always managed to reach this quota, the workers who did not, could not rely on a stable income.

As Erika needed to pick food products, the temperature in the warehouse was close to 0 degrees at all times. Despite the protective clothing provided by the temporary agency, Erika often felt cold at her workplace. This had an adverse effect on her health: "I already feel my knees, my wrists, so it's likely that I already developed mild rheumatism, so no, I would not like to work years in the cold". While Erika was not actively looking for new employment at the time of this interview, her resources would have been extremely limited for finding a new job. Erika's housing was dependent on the temporary agency (object resource), her social network ties in The Netherlands and her language skills were limited (condition resources), and while she was ambitious and had an adaptive personality (personal resource), she had limited knowledge about the Dutch labor market and a small amount of savings (energy resources) for pursuing new opportunities.

# COMPLICATION

## COVID-19 MAGNIFIED THE PRECARIOUS WORKING CONDITIONS OF MIGRANT WORKERS

At the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the media reported about the precarious conditions of many CEE migrants; living in overcrowded accommodations, being unable to work from home, at risk of losing their income and accommodation when sick, having limited access to healthcare, and being unable to travel home due to the Covid-19 restrictions. The demand for migrant workers also grew due to an increase in online shopping. For individual migrant workers, the situation posed a threat to their careers and their wellbeing. For society, the working conditions of migrant workers were perceived as a threat to national health. A task force led by Emile Roemer was assembled to examine the causes that led to the precarious situation of migrant workers. Their report rightfully pointed out issues related to the tripartite employment relationship (temporary agency - user firm - individual worker) and the powerful position of temporary agencies therein (Aanjaagteam Bescherming Arbeidsmigranten, 2020).

In the debate that followed, the fact that the group of CEE migrant workers is diverse in terms of nationalities, languages and cultures was largely overlooked. This further complicates discussions about the precarious lives of CEE migrants. Against the backdrop of Polish, Bulgarian and Romanian workers, an example of a minority group of CEE migrants is that of Hungarian migrant workers. Differences in language, access to social networks and other resources all contribute to an individual's better or worse position to build a sustainable career. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic magnified existing unequal patterns of precariousness among minority groups among CEE migrants, which could lead to further career disruptions.

## ERIKA, A HUNGARIAN MIGRANT WORKER



Erika had been working for 1,5 years as an order picker when the Covid-19 pandemic started. In the wake of the pandemic, she experienced temporary work intensification (having a higher workload) at her workplace, often having to work 12-hour shifts. The long hours were particularly straining for her, considering that she worked six days a week. Most strikingly, when Erika started showing Covid-19 symptoms, the Polish representative of the temporary agency - who took hold of all the workers' health cards upon their employment - did not allow her to take sick leave, required her to show up for her scheduled shift, and was reluctant to make a doctor's appointment for her. Erika felt that this treatment was partially a consequence of not being part of the majority group of Polish workers: "I sometimes feel that we are not theirs, that's how we usually say, that we aren't their people". As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Erika's working conditions became more precarious.

# QUESTION

## HOW DID COVID-19 AFFECT THE SUSTAINABILITY OF HUNGARIAN MIGRANT WORKERS' CAREERS?

In total eleven Hungarian workers were interviewed twice about their life histories, their view on a better job and about Covid-19 as a game changer for their ability to achieve a sustainable career, resulting in a total number of 22 interviews. In the first round, 18 interviews were conducted with migrant workers. In the second round, following the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, 11 of the first round respondents were interviewed again. At the time of the first interview, all interviewees worked in a Dutch warehouse distribution center. The first interview took place in the spring of 2019, before the outbreak of the pandemic. The group was interviewed again in the autumn of 2020, roughly half a year after the outbreak. The length of the two interviews together ranged between 2 and 4 hours per participant.

The interviews highlighted how people find resources in their personal and working lives that enable them to build a sustainable career, as well as situations in which they face a loss of resources. In our research we were particularly interested how these resource processes (resource gain and resource loss cycles) shape the effects of Covid-19 on Hungarian workers. This research is particularly relevant, as previous studies have shown that Covid-19 can act as a career shock (Akkermans et al., 2020), a disruptive and uncommon event outside an individual's control that prompts a thought process about one's career (Akkermans et al., 2018). Central in this report is the question whether the Covid 19 pandemic acted as a career shock that affected the agency of Hungarian migrant workers to build a sustainable career and achieve a decent life.

22 INTERVIEWS  
WITH  
11 PARTICIPANTS

DIVERSE AGE  
ACROSS  
PARTICIPANTS  
(20s-50s)

6 FEMALE AND  
5 MALE  
PARTICIPANTS

2-4 HOURS OF  
INTERVIEW  
DATA WITH  
EACH  
PARTICIPANT

# ANSWER

## SOME GAIN-SOME LOOSE: THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ARE RESOURCE-DEPENDENT

The extent to which Covid-19 can be seen as a career shock for Hungarian migrant workers was dependent on the resources the workers possessed. Examples of these resources were personal resources (e.g. ambition), object resources (e.g. accommodation), condition resources (e.g. language skills) and energy resources (e.g. decent work). Based on the extent to which workers possessed these resources, Covid-19 was either perceived as (1) a positive career shock, (2) a negative career shock or (3) a source of resource stress.

Covid-19 was perceived to be a **positive career shock** by migrant workers when it followed a resource-gain cycle. For instance, one interviewee decided to move to another Western European country due to the precarious working conditions he experienced in the Dutch warehouse distribution sector. Upon his move, he managed to rent an apartment, buy a car and find a stable job in construction with the help of his social network. He perceived Covid-19 as a positive career shock: "This was a sort of two-months-long vacation (...) I'm now aiming for the top, figuratively speaking, so I bought these [inaudible] online courses to get bring my level back up, so when I'm home I'm constantly studying, and I want to go back to be a developer engineer."

Covid-19 was perceived to be a **negative career shock** by migrant workers when it followed a resource-loss cycle. For instance, one interviewee separated from her long-term partner, lost her employment and had to find new accommodation due to having to sell the house her and her partner previously lived in. She perceived Covid-19 as a negative career shock: "I became unemployed and then it was even harder to find a new job because of the virus (...) I was calling, really, every day 10-15 vacancies, well, we can't because of the Corona-virus, this and that, I always ran into this (...) virus."

Covid-19 was perceived to be a **source of resource stress**, when migrant workers experienced a threat of losing their resources as a result of the pandemic. This was particularly the case for migrant workers who were unable to visit their families living in Hungary during the lockdown. These workers had to assess whether they were able to sustain both their energy resources (e.g. employment) and their condition resources (e.g. social network/family ties) in the wake of the pandemic. This resulted in psychological stress: "So we couldn't really meet up, and we were supposed to go home in April, which then got delayed until July, and well in the last few months (...) this in-between-state was very difficult emotionally."

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The Covid-19 pandemic made Erika consciously think about her career. Erika realized that her health was at stake if she continued with this job, so she had to make a choice between two crucial energy resources: her employment and her health. This dilemma also influenced her perceptions of a better job: "It can be in logistics, just not food stuff. So somewhere where it's not four degrees." Therefore, for Erika, the Covid-19 pandemic presented a source of resource stress. Finally, Erika decided to look for new employment, in order to sustain her health: "I definitely feel like this change will help, both a new job and a new place, because it's going to be new, and it's going to be interesting, and I feel like I'm going to be full of aspirations and a desire to prove myself again, that I'm going to show people that I came here to work, and that I want to work."

# IMPLICATIONS

## WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR POLICY?

This study highlighted, that migrant workers often have a limited access to resources due to having multiple dependencies on their employer. In such cases, the employer also provides migrant workers' accommodation and transportation to work. As migrant workers often experience difficulties with finding accommodation upon their arrival to The Netherlands, especially considering the increasingly competitive housing market, this approach can reduce the insecurities experienced by migrants upon their move. However, this also puts migrant workers in a vulnerable situation, as if they lose their employment or find a new job, they also need to look for new accommodation. These multiple dependencies experienced by migrant workers could be reduced by the separation of rental agreements from employment contracts. This could be facilitated by promoting independent organizations, which focus solely on offering housing and/or transportation to migrant workers in flexible or temporary agency employment. This recommendation further supports the advice of the Aanjaagteam Bescherming Arbeidsmigranten (Aanjaagteam Bescherming Arbeidsmigranten, 2020).

Based on the findings of this research, the location of migrant workers' housing is a particularly pressing issue. Hungarian migrant workers are often housed excessive distances away from their workplace, secluded from basic amenities, like the supermarket. This does not only make their everyday life difficult, but also reduces their time for recovery due to transportation time, limits their time available for skill development (e.g. language courses) and limits their contact with the members of the host country society. Making sure that migrant workers have access to housing that is (1) affordable; (2) of quality and (3) independent of migrant's employment contract should be the primary focus of policy makers. Such housing, constituting an object resource, can support the sustainability of migrant workers' careers in The Netherlands.

## WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR USER FIRMS & TEMPORARY AGENCIES?

Many of the Hungarian migrant workers in our study were employed through temporary agencies, performing their work at a user firm. Based on the interviews, precarious working conditions were common in the Dutch warehouse distribution sector, both before and during Covid-19. To counter these precarious working conditions, it is essential that user firms and temporary agencies treat migrant workers as an end in themselves, rather than as a means to an end. This can be achieved by offering work:

1. Where the fair and equal treatment of employees is not only a principle, but an everyday practice, involving continuous dialogue with employees about their needs;
2. Which involves sensible working times and workload, allowing for a sufficient work-life balance for employees;
3. Which allows for employees' personal and professional development;
4. Which, at minimum, provides a living wage for employees;
5. Which offers social protection to employees;
6. Which contributes towards employees' sustainable employability;
7. Which adheres to the health and safety standards prescribed by law.

With the growth of the Dutch warehouse distribution sector, CEE migrant workers will continue to be essential workers after Covid-19. Good employers offering decent working conditions to their employees could benefit from lower levels of turnover.

# IMPLICATIONS

## WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR MIGRANT WORKERS?

The findings of this research show that migrant workers need to have access to resources in order to navigate the Dutch labour market and build a sustainable career. The most important resources include resilience (personal resource), accommodation independent from employment contract (object resource), language skills (generally Dutch or English) and social network ties (condition resources), and knowledge about the Dutch labour market, savings and generally good physical and mental health (energy resources). These resources are extremely important for dealing with the impact of career shocks, such as Covid-19. Before accepting a job in The Netherlands, migrant workers should try to obtain information about others' experiences with the given employer (via social media groups or social networks) and should critically assess the conditions of employment offered.

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