



# Labor Costs in Agriculture: Brief Analysis of the Romanian Sector

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## ABSTRACT

The research proposes an comparative analysis of the evolution of labour costs in the national agricultural sector in the period 2017-2021. The study was conducted using data provided by the national and European statistical systems. For bibliographic documentation, the official releases of the National Institute of Statistics, Google Scholar, Clarivate Analytics, and ResearchGate were taken into account. The results of the comparative analysis of labour costs have shown a steady increase across all sectors of activity at the national level in Romania, including in the agricultural sector. The agricultural sector records costs significantly below the national average, an important aspect to be considered in the development of strategies for optimizing the management of agricultural enterprises. The lack of balance in labour costs can have effects on the financial performance and competitiveness of businesses, as well as on the job market and the overall economy.

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, agriculture is one of the most important sources of food and subsistence for the planet's population. Agriculture is responsible for producing a major percentage of the food consumed by humans and for providing income for millions of families around the world. In Romania, agriculture is an important branch of the economy, which occupies a significant percentage of the workforce and contributes to the national Gross Domestic Product (PIB). Agriculture is responsible for the production of food and raw materials, such as cereals, vegetables, and fruits, but also for the production of textile materials and biofuels. Despite the problems and challenges, Romanian agriculture has recorded significant growth in recent years, demonstrating its importance for the country's economy.

The comparative analysis of total and net labour costs in the agricultural sector in Romania during the period 2017-2021 aims to evaluate the competitiveness of this sector compared to other fields of activity and to identify any problems regarding the use of human resources within it. The objective of this research is to carry out a comparative analysis of labour costs with a focus on the national level, the ranking of the sector, and to identify trends and factors that have influenced these costs, and to propose solutions for optimizing the management of agricultural enterprises. Labour is one of the most important resources for the agricultural sector, both nationally and globally. Agriculture is an industry that requires a significant workforce to operate and produce food and other agricultural products. The importance of the workforce in agriculture can be seen from several perspectives. Firstly, agriculture can be an important source of employment for people living in rural areas, where few other job options are available. This is why many people living in rural areas choose to work in agriculture or to start their own agricultural businesses. Secondly, the workforce in agriculture is essential to maximize productivity and ensure sufficient food production to feed a growing population. Modern agriculture uses advanced technology, such as agricultural machinery and irrigation systems, but is still dependent on manual labour for planting, harvesting, and other agricultural activities. The agricultural workforce is also important to ensure the sustainability of the agricultural sector in the long term, and to cope with climate change and other challenges, agriculture needs a well-trained and specialized workforce, with competitive and motivated salaries, who can implement new technologies and improve existing agricultural processes.

It is important to analyze the labour market to determine the level of salaries and other benefits offered by employers. This analysis helps to understand the demand and supply of labour and the

competition between employers to attract and retain qualified employees. Evaluating employee productivity can also help determine the optimal level of compensation. In general, employers must pay employees based on their performance and provide additional incentives based on performance, negotiate salaries and benefits with employees to achieve a balance between labour costs and productivity. It is also important to provide benefits that attract and retain qualified employees, but without increasing costs too much. In recent years, labour costs have significantly increased due to rising wages, inflation, and other factors.

## 2. Literature review

The agricultural sector in Romania, which serves as the main source of income, has been a topic of intense analysis and debate by economic and agricultural engineering experts regarding workforce, gross and net salary levels, and the level of qualification in the field. Considering the recent economic trends in the agricultural sector, it has become an extremely important profit generator for both individual farmers and the national economy (Stanciu et al., 2019). According to the conclusions of Popescu et al. (2021) regarding the analysis of the labour market in Romanian agriculture, there is still low productivity in the agricultural sector due to high labour inputs and unbalanced human resource costs. Workforce has been analysed in comparison with crop yields in the agricultural sector, and the results have shown that although the number of employed people has decreased, the yield of the most important agricultural crops has increased mainly due to technological advancements (Tudor et al., 2022). There have been studies where the unit (total) cost of labour has been considered as an indicator of competitiveness, rather than simply measuring it, and comparative analyses with the situation in the European Union (E.U.) have concluded that there is a direct influence of the European labour market, and trends lead to a balance, especially regarding the uniformization of labour costs in Romania with the European level (Craciun et al., 2019). Labour market statistics are extremely important and can offer certain estimations for the future. It is vital for Romania to implement labour market strategies to cope with changes, increase economic visibility, and, most importantly, to correlate the relationship between the employer, employee, and the labour market (Somogyi, 2020). To reduce the fiscal burden for certain categories of taxpayers or for certain economic activities, Romania applies various fiscal facilities. In 2022, by Law 135/2022 and Order of the Ministry of Finance 1525/2022, the procedure for granting fiscal facilities in the agricultural sector and food industry began, which will mainly impact labour costs, total average salary, and net income obtained by each employee (Parliament of Romania 2022). The consequences of implementing these facilities will only be observable in a subsequent analysis after a minimum of three years from their implementation since any measures of this kind can have both positive and negative effects. According to an analysis conducted in 2020 on the evolution of earnings in Romania, the Covid-19 crisis will have a major impact on the level of net, gross, or total salaries, and there will be certain sectors that will be much more affected, thus creating imbalances in the labour market, and requiring government support in those areas (Anghelache et al., 2020). Solidarity is essential, especially in such situations, to be able to accept certain measures, even austerity measures for the entire population (Anghelache et al., 2020).

In Romania, the large share of people engaged in agricultural activities, against the background of a very low level of productivity suggests that agriculture provides a source of minimum income for many rural households and alleviates rural poverty (Tocco, Davidova and Bailey, 2014).

## 3. Results and discussions

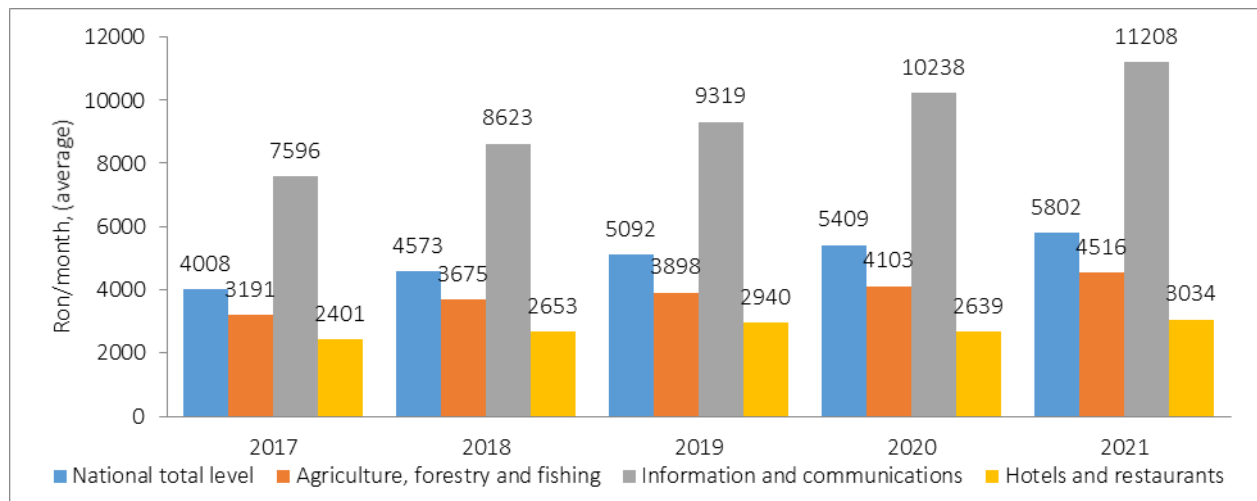
### **The average total monthly cost of labour for activities in the national economy.**

Labour cost represents all expenses incurred by employers for the workforce they use in their activities. The total cost of labour includes direct expenses, such as the actual gross amounts paid, as well as indirect expenses such as social security contributions, professional training expenses, cultural and educational services, accommodation, transportation, teaching materials, and even expenses for protective equipment. Additional expenses such as fees paid to members of the board of directors, expenses for occupational health, and sums paid for COVID-19 testing and prevention are also included. In Romania, the national average monthly cost has shown a permanent increase since 2017, so that at the end of 2021, the monthly average cost at the national level for one employee was 5802.00 lei. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS, 2022a), not only the national average has shown a permanent increase from 2017 to 2021 At the national level, but also all sectors of the national economy. Figure 1 presents and processes data for the national average, the agricultural sector, and the information and communication sector, as well as the hotel and restaurant activities sector. The latter two sectors ranked first and last in the evolution of the average total labour cost. In 2017, the national average total cost was 4008 RON, while the information and communication sector had a cost of 7596 RON, 90% higher than the national average, and the hotel and restaurant activities sector had a cost of 2401 RON, 60% lower than the national average. The difference was notable. In the agricultural sector, the average total cost in 2017 was 3191 RON, approximately 20% lower than the national average, 58% lower than the information and communication sector, and only 25% higher than the hotel and restaurant activities sector.

During the analyzed period, the increases in the average cost of labour in the targeted sectors were as follows:

- Nationwide, the increase in 2021 compared to 2017 was 44.76%, from 4008 RON to 5802 RON.
- For the agricultural sector, the increase in 2021 compared to 2017 was 41.52%, from 3191 RON to 4516 RON.
- For the information and communication sector, the increase in 2021 compared to 2017 was 47.55%, from 7596 RON to 11208 RON.
- For the hotels and restaurants sector, the increase in 2021 compared to 2017 was 26.36%, from 2401 RON to 3034 RON.

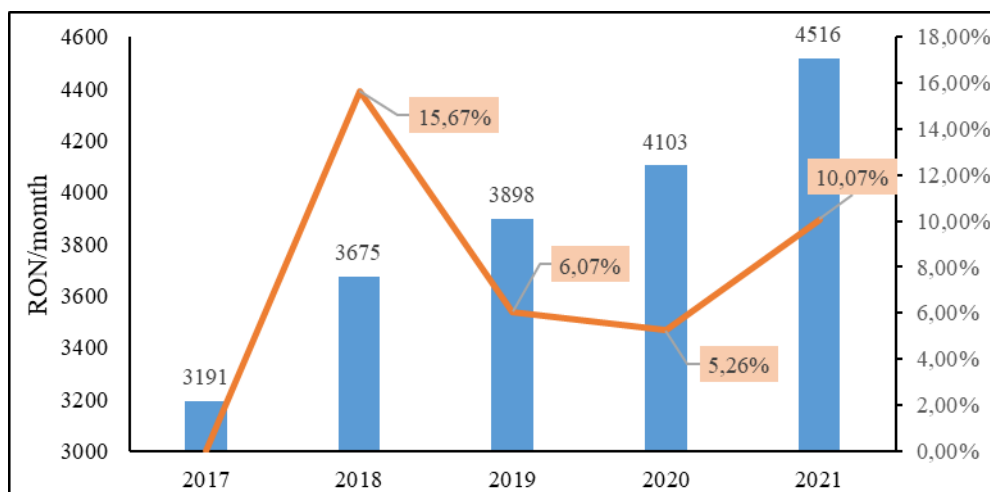
The increase in the total cost of labour in various sectors of the national economy, may be attributed to inflation and the general increase in the cost of living. As the prices of goods and services go up, the wages and salaries of workers also increase to keep up with the rising costs. Another possible reason for the increase in the total cost of labour could be due to a higher demand for labour. With the growth of these industries, more workers are needed to meet the demand for products and services. This increased demand for labour may have driven up the wages and salaries of workers, resulting in a higher total cost of labour.



**Figure.1 Labour cost by economic activities in the national economy 2017-2021 (average)**

Source: Authors, by using INSSE (2023)

Based on the calculations made, it can be observed that the percentage share compared to the national average behaves similarly to the actual increase in the average monthly labour cost, with the percentage of growth being lower for industries that are lower in the ranking. From the year-over-year analysis of the average cost evolution in the agricultural sector during the 2017-2021 period, it is evident that its position in the ranking is stable, below the national average, and is surpassed by 14 other areas of activity. The increases in the average total cost in the agricultural sector were constant, but did not exceed the national average as can be seen in Figure 2.



**Figure.2 Labour cost in Romanian agriculture 2017-2021**

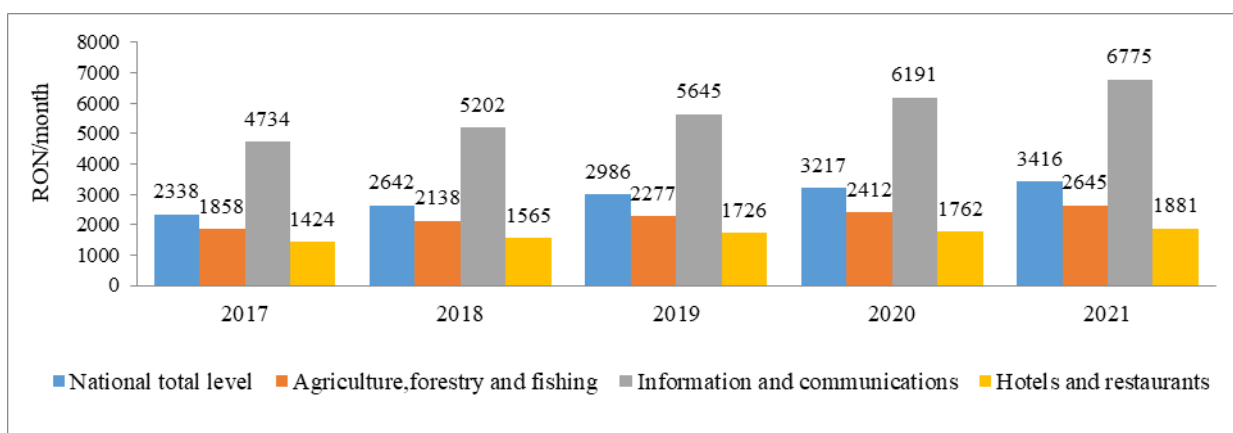
Source: Authors, by using INSSE (2023)

The mean overall expenses in the agricultural sector has consistently increased over the last five years, with an average annual growth of approximately 8% from 2017 to 2021. Annual percentage increases in the average total cost in the agricultural sector during the analyzed period were higher than Romania's average annual inflation, indicating a significant cost increase in the agricultural sector during this period. The highest percentage increase was recorded in 2018, compared to 2017, which may suggest a significant shift in agricultural sector costs that could be related to various factors such as changes in input prices, government policies, market demand shifts, or other major economic events. The average labour cost in the agricultural sector is consistently lower than the national average and other sectors such as financial intermediation and insurance, public administration and defense, social security in the public system, transportation and storage, and even cultural and recreational activities. The sector is facing challenges in attracting and retaining skilled labour, which may affect its long-term growth and development. It is important to carefully analyze and address the underlying factors that contribute to the lower labour cost in agriculture to ensure its sustainability and resilience in the future.

**The average monthly net wage income earned by the labour force engaged in activities within the national economy.**

The net nominal wage income is a measure of the net income that an employee receives for their work. It is defined as the amount of money that an employee regularly receives from their employer after all mandatory taxes and social contributions have been deducted. Therefore, the net nominal wage income represents the actual income that the employee receives in hand and can spend to meet their basic needs or other personal expenses. It is important to note that this income may vary depending on the employee's gross salary, as well as the level of taxes and mandatory social contributions applied depending on the field of activity.

Figure 3 represents statistical information from the National Institute of Statistics (INS, 2022b) regarding the evolution of the average monthly net nominal wage income during the period 2017-2021. Compared to the data interpreted in the context of the average total monthly labour cost (Figure 1), the same fields of activity occupy both first and last places in the ranking, with the agricultural sector occupying the 15th place in terms of net nominal wage income. The national average of net nominal wage income had a growth of 46.11% in 2021 compared to 2017, with 1.35% more growth than the average total cost, which means that the employee effectively received a higher net amount from the total costs that an employer has with an employee. In the information and communications sector, the growth was 43.11% from 4734 RON in 2017 to 6775 RON in 2021, with a percentage 4.44% lower than the growth recorded for the average total cost (47.55%). On the other hand, the hotel and restaurant activities had a growth of 32.09% in 2021 compared to 2017, from 1424 RON to 1881 RON, with a percentage 5.73% higher than the growth recorded for the average total cost (26.36%). These percentage differences between the average cost and net nominal wage income show us how the money is used depending on the field of activity and reported to direct and indirect expenses, as well as which employees have a higher share of net salary in the total costs incurred by the employer on their behalf. Policymakers and businesses should pay attention to the differences in the nominal net wage gain across different fields of activity and consider implementing policies that ensure fair remuneration for employees in all fields. It is crucial to consider that employees' wages are not just an expense for businesses but a crucial factor in their overall success and sustainability.



**Figure 3. Labour net salary incomes by economic activities in Romania 2017-2021**

Source: Authors, by using INSSE (2023)

The evolution of net wage earnings in the agricultural sector behaves similarly to other sectors, with a steady increase from year to year, without any declines and in line with the overall cost evolution. Specifically, there has been an increase of 280 RON in 2018 compared to 2017, 138 RON in 2019 compared to

2018, 135 RON in 2020 compared to 2019, and 233 RON in 2021 compared to 2020. The largest increase occurred in 2018, followed by a period of smaller increases of less than 150 RON, until the increase in 2021 exceeded 200 RON once again. In 2021, the net wage earnings in the agricultural sector are 771 RON lower than the national average, representing approximately 30% of the 2645 RON that an employee receives each month for their activity. Table 1 presents a ranking of economic activities for 2021, based on both the total cost of labour and net wage earnings. The ranking shows that not all economic activities have the same position in both rankings. Information and communication activities rank first in both rankings, while hotel and restaurant activities rank last. Agriculture maintains its position at 15th place, far from the top of the ranking. There are eight economic activities that have net wage earnings above the national average and 11 with earnings below the average. By calculating the difference between total cost and net wage earnings, and comparing it to the net salary, it is observed that there are sectors that allocate higher sums to indirect expenses, depending on necessity or the applied labour force stimulation strategies. The construction sector, which already benefits from fiscal facilities, has a difference of only 1243 RON between total cost and net wage earnings, meaning that the amount actually received by the employee represents 72.70% of the total expenses incurred by the employer. Similar fiscal facilities have also been implemented in the agricultural sector since 2022, but their effects have yet to be observed and quantified. The differences in total costs and net wage earnings compared to the national average, by economic activity in 2021, range from +93.17% to -47.47%, which highlights the need to develop strategies in all sectors, particularly in agriculture. Labour costs in the agricultural sector are significantly lower than the national average, indicating that there may be potential for cost optimization in this sector and while this may present challenges in terms of attracting and retaining skilled labour, it also creates opportunities for the sector to improve its competitiveness through cost optimization measures.

**Table1. National ranking of labour costs (2021)**

| Activities of the national economy<br>(Accordin NACE Rev.3)                         | Ranking<br>by total<br>cost | Year<br>2021/RON<br>Average Total<br>Cost | Difference<br>compared to<br>the national<br>average cost<br>% | Year 2021/<br>RON<br><br>Net salary<br>earnings | Ranking<br>by Net<br>Salary,<br>Year 2021 | The<br>difference<br>between total<br>cost and net<br>salary |
|---|-----------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
| Information and communication activities  | 1                           | 11208                                     | +93.17   | 6775  | 1   | 4433   |
| Financial and insurance activities  | 2                           | 9749                                      | +68.03   | 5576  | 2   | 4173   |
| Industria extractiva  | 3                           | 9484                                      | +63.46   | 4921  | 5   | 4563   |
| Production and supply of electricity and heat, gas, hot water, and air conditioning | 4                           | 9172                                      | +58.08   | 5187  | 4   | 3985   |
| Health and social assistance  | 5                           | 8026                                      | +38.33   | 4084  | 7   | 3942   |
| Public administration and defense; compulsory social security                       | 6                           | 7516                                      | +29.54   | 5278  | 3   | 2238   |
| Professional, scientific and technical activities                                   | 7                           | 7352                                      | +26.71   | 4401  | 6   | 2951   |
| Education   | 8                           | 6254                                      | +7.79  | 3572  | 8   | 2682   |
| <b>National Average</b>   |                             | <b>5802</b>                               |  | <b>3416</b>                                     |   | <b>2386</b>  |
| Transportation and storage  | 9                           | 5408                                      | -6.79  | 3064  | 10  | 2344   |
| Manufacturing industry  | 10                          | 5193                                      | -10.50   | 2996  | 11  | 2197   |
| Performing arts, cultural and recreational activities                               | 11                          | 4961                                      | -14.50   | 2912  | 12  | 2049   |
| Water distribution; waste management, decontamination activities                    | 12                          | 4858                                      | -16.27   | 2770  | 14  | 2088   |
| Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles                | 13                          | 4812                                      | -17.06   | 2806  | 13  | 2006   |
| Construction  | 14                          | 4554                                      | -21.51   | 3311  | 9   | 1243   |
| <b>Agriculture, forestry and fishing</b>  | <b>15</b>                   | <b>4516</b>                               | <b>-22.16</b>  | <b>2645</b>                                     | <b>15</b>                                 | <b>1871</b>  |
| Administrative and support service activities                                       | 16                          | 4423                                      | -23.77   | 2568  | 16  | 1855   |
| Real estate transactions  | 17                          | 4256                                      | -26.65   | 2449  | 17  | 1807   |
| Other service activities  | 18                          | 3720                                      | -35.88   | 2159  | 18  | 1561   |
| Hotels and restaurants  | 19                          | 3048                                      | -47.47   | 1881  | 19  | 1167   |

Source: Authors, by using INSSE (2023)

A detailed situation analysis of the agricultural sector in Romania in 2021 was carried out, taking into account both the development regions and the amounts allocated to men and women. Table 2 presents the ranking of regions based on the monthly net wage earnings, and it is observed that only two regions, Bucharest-Ilfov and North-East, are above the national average, with the first ranked having a net salary of over 3000 RON. The rest of the regions are below the national average, with the South-East region being ranked last with some net wage earnings of only 2521 RON, 5.01% lower than the national average. If Bucharest-Ilfov and North-East regions were excluded from the calculation, the national net wage earnings in 2021 would be only 2201 RON, as these two regions are the only ones that raise the national average of the

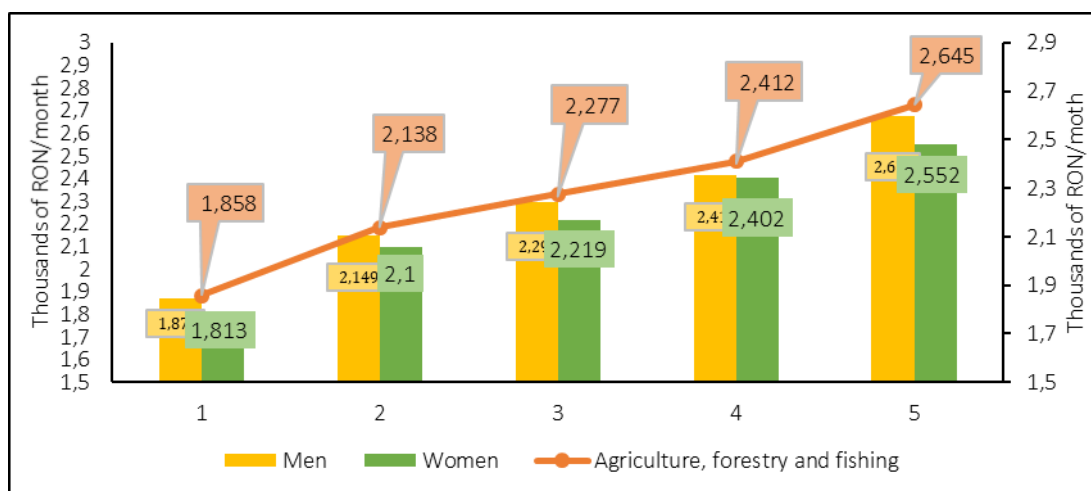
sector. Such a simulation indicates that the situation regarding net wages in agriculture is significantly different for 80% of the country.

**Table 2. Net salary of the labour force in Romanian agriculture 2021 (average, RON/month)**

| Region  | RON  | Difference from the national average (%) |
|---|------|--|
| Bucharest-Ilfov                                 | 3112 | +17.26                                   |
| North-East                                      | 2712 | +2.19                                    |
| The national average in the agricultural sector | 2654 | 100                                      |
| North-West                                      | 2598 | -2.11                                    |
| South-Muntenia                                  | 2558 | -3.62                                    |
| South-West Oltenia                              | 2552 | -3.84                                    |
| Central   | 2525 | -4.86                                    |
| South-East                                      | 2521 | -5.01                                    |

Source: Authors, by using INSSE (2023)

The analysis of the net wage in the agricultural sector, from the perspective of the amounts allocated to women and men, was conducted at the national level for the period of 2017-2021 and graphically represented in parallel for each year in Figure 4, where can be also observed the growth curve of the net salary average in the agricultural sector for agriculture, forestry, and fishing. In line with the national average of the net wage and the average in the agricultural sector, and for the analysis by gender, annual increases are observed, without periods of decline and with a higher net salary value attributed to men than to women. Men earn more than women in the following way: in 2017 with 58 RON, in 2018 with 49 RON, in 2019 with 76 RON, in 2020 with 13 RON, and in 2021 with 122 RON. The year 2021 has the largest difference between women's and men's salaries in the agricultural sector in Romania, with a sum representing 4.6 percentage points less than the national net salary average for the sector (figure 4).



**Figure 4. Net labour cost in Romanian agriculture field 2017-2021**

Source: Authors, by using INSSE (2023)

There are also other fields at the national level where the net wage earnings are higher among men, but there are also fields where the proportion is reversed. These aspects are strictly related to the nature of the work performed, the place of activity, the complexity and degree of qualification of an employee, regardless of gender, in a certain field. In comparison to other fields where there is a difference in net wage between men and women, the differences in the agricultura sector can be influenced by several factors, such as a higher balance of men in leadership and management positions, the degree of qualification and experience of employees, differences in working hours, and types of employment contracts. There are also a number of social and cultural factors that can influence these differences, such as gender stereotypes, traditional roles assigned to each sex, and workplace discrimination. Traditionally, agriculture has been considered a predominantly male field due to the fact that fieldwork and animal care were seen as physically intensive activities that require strength and physical resilience. Additionally, in many societies, men were deemed more suited to lead and manage agricultural businesses. However, in recent decades, women have begun to have a greater presence in agriculture, being recognized for their skills in areas such as financial management, marketing, and human resource management. Currently, there is greater diversity in the

agricultural sector and efforts are being made to eliminate gender barriers to allow women equal access to opportunities in this field.

#### 4. Conclusions

Labour costs represent one of the biggest expenses for companies in all sectors of activity in Romania. From an economic standpoint, labour is one of the most important resources in any field of activity, but particularly in the agricultural sector. Nationally, salaries in the agricultural sector are lower than in other sectors, such as industry or services. However, the total labour costs in the agricultural sector in Romania are relatively high compared to other countries, especially in Eastern Europe. The main costs associated with labour in the agricultural sector include wages, taxes and fees, social insurance, professional training, and other benefits. An important factor that influences labour costs is the degree of automation of agricultural processes, and Romania is still at a low level of automation, which can lead to higher labour costs. To reduce total labour costs, some agricultural companies in Romania have adopted new and more efficient technologies, such as robotics or automation systems. It is important to optimize work processes and reduce the time required to perform tasks to reduce labour costs. Developing a qualified and specialized workforce is also important to increase productivity and efficiency. Increasing employee productivity can be achieved through continuous training and education. Labour costs in the agricultural sector must be taken into account when planning production and setting product prices. In the context of rising labour costs, some agricultural companies in Romania may need to restrict their activities or relocate their businesses to other countries with lower costs.

A low cost of labour means that employers can pay less for the work performed by employees, which can have positive or negative effects on the economy and society depending on the context. On the one hand, a low cost of labour can attract foreign investors and encourage existing companies to grow and create new jobs. It can also lead to an increase in exports by reducing production costs. On the other hand, low wages can lead to a decrease in the standard of living and an increase in poverty. This can have negative consequences on the health and education of the population and can lead to an increase in social inequality. Additionally, a low cost of labour can lead to a decrease in labour standards and an increase in employee exploitation. It is important to find a balance to ensure a skilled and motivated workforce, as well as a profitable and competitive business in the labour market.

There are several strategies that employers can use to achieve a balance in labour costs. Here are some of them:

- Reducing recruitment costs - Employers can use strategies such as internal recruitment, collaborating with recruitment agencies, using social networks, and other methods to attract suitable candidates at lower costs.
- Work schedule flexibility - Another strategy is to offer flexible work schedule options, such as reduced schedules or remote work. This can reduce costs associated with salaries and benefits, but can also offer additional benefits such as a better quality of life for employees.
- Automation and outsourcing - Automating processes and outsourcing tasks to other companies can reduce labour costs. However, these strategies must be used with caution to avoid job loss and quality issues.
- Increasing productivity - Employers can implement productivity-increasing strategies through training, technology, improving the work environment, and others. This can lead to a reduction in labour costs per production unit.

As a final conclusion, total and net labour costs represent a significant challenge for all industries in Romania, especially in the agricultural sector. However, by adopting new and more efficient technologies and investing in training and development of the workforce, optimal and balanced strategies can be achieved. The government could offer more incentives and subsidies for companies investing in the development and modernization of production processes, as well as in continuous training and education of the workforce, as human resources remain one of the most important resources available.

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