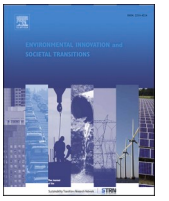
Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions 60 (2026) 101131

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/eist



Reaching the wild berry industry: A spatially relational account of the state and incumbents during transition processes

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Geography of sustainability transitions
Sociospatial actor relations
Seasonal migrant workers
Wild berry industry

ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamic interrelationships between the state and incumbents in efforts to promote social sustainability in the wild berry industry. Focusing on these actors' relations and strategies, it highlights the relational proximities and distances of their interactions, particularly in efforts to ensure social sustainability for seasonal migrant workers, who often face exploitation. By examining changes in migration and labour-market policy in the Swedish and Finnish wild berry industries, we show how transitions are continuously shaped through a variety of mediated relations of proximity and distance, extending the geographical perspective on sustainability transitions through a spatially relational account of state—incumbent interactions. Additionally, by studying how sustainability efforts are operationalised in each country, we provide insights into a possible transition within the wild berry industry. More broadly, the article contributes to deeper knowledge about how sustainability transitions might unfold in practice, contributing to an understanding of how seemingly uncontrollable processes are configured.

1. Introduction

Sustainability transitions are driven by a wide range of actors; for example, firms, governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), individuals, households, industry organisations or unions. Thus, to comprehend transitions, it is necessary to understand the underlying dynamics between different actors (Avelino et al., 2016; Patterson et al., 2017). Consequently, early assumptions within sustainability transition research, characterised by a hierarchical perspective in which change occurs 'from the bottom up', have come to be increasingly questioned (Chang et al., 2017). For example, scholars have, contributed to a broader understanding of incumbents, actors who dominate markets and hold significant influence over current processes and key resources, and their role in transitions (Saleh, 2025; Turnheim & Sovacool, 2020). However, in the emerging strand of literature exploring the geography of transitions, scholars have stressed the need not only to consider that transitions occur at different scales, but also to understand how actors who perform transitions at multiple scales relate to each other (Coenen et al., 2012). In addition, others have argued that the role of the state needs to be more widely recognised if transition processes are to be better understood (Eckersley, 2021; Ehnert et al., 2018; Johnstone & Newell, 2018). Accordingly, several researchers have advocated for a strategic relational approach (Jessop, 1990, 2016) to capture states' formulation, functions and effects (Argyriou & Barry, 2021; Lis-Plesińska et al., 2024; Misleh et al., 2024). Treating the state as a social relation, it has been argued, allows transition research to become better attuned to the entwined practices performed by actors in, through and in interaction with the state (Silvester & Fisker, 2023).

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2026.101131
Received 22 April 2025; Received in revised form 8 March 2026; Accepted 18 March 2026
Available online 13 April 2026
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While acknowledging this relational perspective on the state in transition processes, we argue that more work can be done to deepen our understanding of the state's role within sustainability transitions by adopting a relational spatial account of how state actors interacts with incumbents (Allen & Cochrane, 2010). This perspective builds on the non-metric qualities of space and an understanding that distances between actors can be mediated so that those who are close can be rendered distant and those who are distant can be brought close. Grasping these spatial dynamics in the relationships between state actors and incumbents can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how such relationships take shape and convey meaning (Allen, 2025).

Furthermore, this article presents a novel empirical case with an explicit focus on social sustainability, complementing previous literature on the role of the state in transitions, which has primarily focused on environmental aspects, for example drawing on concepts such as the 'green state' (Bäckstrand, 2024). Aligning with research that emphasises the importance of extending the empirical focus of sustainability transitions to areas such as food and agriculture (Hinrichs, 2014), as well as the need to be more sensitive to social concerns and just transitions, including securing equity for workers (Avelino et al., 2024; Olofsson, 2025), this study focuses on efforts to ensure proper working conditions for migrant wild berry pickers in Sweden and Finland. The wild berry industry faces significant social sustainability challenges, including transnationally elongated employment relations, precarious working conditions, unpaid wages and a high risk of indebtedness (Hedberg et al., 2019:3; Herzfeld Olsson, 2018; Seikkula, 2024; Wingborg, 2023; Yimprasert, 2014). Additionally, there have been juridical proceedings and convictions concerning aggravated human exploitation and human trafficking for forced labour (Finnish Supreme Court, 2022; Swedish Equality and Gender Agency, 2024). Consequently, the industry has been subjected to a string of measures aimed at enhancing social sustainability, involving diverse actors and their multifarious relationships.

Analysing the wild berry industries in Sweden and Finland, two leading countries in wild berry extraction, we seek to explore relationships between the state and incumbents in efforts to promote social sustainability in the wild berry industry. Through a document analysis of migration regulation and working-life criminality policies, press releases and newspaper articles as well as complementary interviews with incumbents, governmental actors and NGOs, we uncover how the Swedish and Finnish states have tried to secure labour rights for seasonal migrant workers. Using geographical theories of socio-spatial relations (Allen, 2016) and drawing on the concepts of reach and presence – enrolment, re-embedding, arm's-length reach, drawing close and placing out of reach – we elucidate how interactions between the state and incumbents in efforts to promote social sustainability in the wild berry industry are continuously mediated relations of proximity and distance. By extension, we show that transitions are made up of and gain their shape through a variety of spatial dynamics between state and non-state actors. Hence, we offer insights that might contribute to both actual change in the wild berry industry and, more broadly, deeper knowledge about how sustainability transitions occur in practice. This can aid an understanding of how seemingly uncontrollable processes are configured (Shove & Walker, 2010), as well as a relational spatial account of state—incumbent interactions in transition processes.

The following section sets out a conceptual background to how the state and incumbents have attracted increased interest in the sustainability transition literature. We argue that our understanding of the role of, and the relationships between, state actors and incumbents during transition processes might be deepened by focusing the analysis on the inherently spatial nature of these relationships. Then, we outline a framework for analysing how relations of proximity and distance between state actors and incumbents are continuously mediated and leveraged within transition processes. The final section draws on efforts to transform the Swedish and Finnish wild berry industries to illustrate these points empirically. After a brief background to the wild berry industry and a methods section, we highlight how Swedish and Finnish state actors, often in conjunction with incumbents, have strived for social sustainability by attempting to rearrange their emerging wild berry industries, drawing attention to the spatial dimensions of state—incumbent relationships. We conclude with a section that discusses how the proposed relational spatial approach can extend the current understanding of interactions between the state and incumbents in sustainability transitions, outlines this study's limitations and provides suggestions for future research.

2. Conceptual background and theoretical framework

2.1. Incumbents' diversification is increasingly recognised, but a deeper anchoring in geographical thinking is needed

Early sustainability transition literature often assumed that change occurs 'from the bottom up' by those occupying niches that successfully challenge a dominant regime of, for example, shared cognitive routines, standards and/or regulations, while characterising incumbents as inert or resistant to change (Chandrashekeran, 2016; Hess, 2016). This led to calls for the pluralising of perspectives on incumbents and explorations of their role in transition processes (Turnheim & Sovacool, 2020); for example, by highlighting that they can drive transitions when their motivation and capacity to do so are high (Hellsmark & Hansen, 2020). Others have argued that transitions take place at multiple scales (Berggren et al., 2015; Mura et al., 2021), and have suggested that incumbents can play a diverse set of roles at different scales in transition processes (Saleh, 2025). However, geographers have pointed out that, since scales are actively constructed through socio-spatial struggles, it is important not simply to identify the scale at which transitions take place, but also to recognise how different scales are related through actors' relationships (Coenen et al., 2012). In particular, transition literature has been criticised for being permeated by a superficial geographical understanding of relational patterns, with socio-spatial perspectives characterised by a priori scalar hierarchies and fixed boundaries (Affolderbach & Schulz, 2016; Binz et al., 2025; Binz et al., 2014; Calvert et al., 2017).

Thus, in the literature on the geography of transitions, some scholars have started to unpack actor relationships in sustainability transitions by drawing upon economic geography debates about proximity (Raven et al., 2012; Strambach & Pflitsch, 2018). Hansen (2015), for example, examines how relational proximity may substitute for or overlap with physical proximity in collaborative

innovation projects. Murphy (2015) argues that legitimisation and trust-building are crucial to enable relational proximity between incumbents and actors at other scales because they create mechanisms of relational proximities through which incumbents can absorb or embed new technologies and practices as they emerge from below.

2.2. Towards a topological understanding of state—incumbent relations

As the perspectives on incumbents in transitions have broadened over the years (Kungl, 2024; Saleh, 2025), so has the recognition of their social embeddedness within an institutional context and their entangled relations with state actors (Novalia et al., 2021; Runhaar et al., 2025). Thus, an increasing number of scholars have attempted to integrate sustainability transition research with literature that emphasises the unique role and capacity of the state in transformative work towards sustainability, as, for example, the 'green state', the 'environmental state' or the 'ecological state' (Christoff, 2005; Duit et al., 2016; Eckersley, 2004; Lundqvist, 2001; Meadowcroft, 2021; Meadowcroft et al., 2012). However, concerns have been raised that these strands of literature have been developed from normative ideas about what states ought to be and less from what states are and how they actually work during transition processes (Silvester & Fisker, 2023). Drawing on the strategic relational approach of Jessop (1990, 2016), some have therefore argued for a relational conceptualisation of the state that emphasises the contingent nature of state strategies (Argyriou & Barry, 2021; Lis-Plesińska et al., 2024; Misleh et al., 2024). Such an understanding of the state stresses its relations with other social groups and enables a more fine-grained analysis of the state's role in transition processes by unveiling the entwined practices performed by actors working in, through and in interaction with different parts of the state apparatus (Silvester & Fisker, 2023).

Expanding on this relational approach of the state in transitions, as well as building on the idea that insights drawn from geographical thinking can enrich the understanding of the state in sustainability transitions (Johnstone & Newell, 2018), this article takes a different starting point, with a topological account of state spatiality. This approach stresses that states' relations with other actors, incumbents in this case, cannot be understood through physical distance and holds no predetermined spatialities, whether vertical or horizontal (Allen & Cochrane, 2010). Instead, the relational geographies of states' interactions with other actors are continuously mediated in a way that distorts conventional understandings of who or what is nearby or distant. From this perspective, proximity and distance between actors can be leveraged so that what seems distant can be brought closer, and what is close can be rendered distant (Allen, 2011). Hence, relationships between actors are inherently spatial and formed through spatially enacted practices.

Following calls for a more meticulous use of geographical concepts (Binz et al., 2020; Veldhuizen, 2021) and the deliberate slowing down of abstraction to ensure sufficient anchoring in geographical thinking (Schwanen, 2018), this article explores interactions between state actors and incumbents in their efforts to promote social sustainability through a relational perspective on proximity and distance. It draws upon spatial theories of social relations (Allen, 2016) to grasp how relations between the state and incumbents within transition processes are continuously made and remade in spatial ways.

2.3. Mediating state—incumbent relations of proximity and distance through reach

To explain how relations of proximity and distance can be mediated, Allen (2016) introduced the concept of reach. Through reach, he argues, actors dissolve the gap between what is 'here' and what is 'there', constructing relationships that transcend physical distance. Allen (2016) identifies three distinct forms of reach, each describing a different way to dissolve distance or, conversely, to undo proximity: *folding in reach, stretching to reach* and *placing beyond reach*. These forms of reach can all be understood in terms of intensity and presence, rather than physical distance. From this perspective, presence is relational, meaning that an actor can be present while physically distant or can have a presence elsewhere while being physically nearby. Reach can therefore be understood as the different ways in which actors make their presence felt in more or less powerful ways.

Folding in reach (Allen, 2016) refers to the process through which relational proximity is created with actors who are physically absent. By folding distant others into a shared co-presence, actors create the experience of simultaneity. For example, reading transition literature through this lens, Bäckstrand et al.'s (2024) and Nasiritousi and Grimm's (2022) descriptions of how the state can enlist intermediaries to steer a targeted group towards sustainability (eg. industries, cities or other organisations) and how this orchestration can be considered a pooling of public and private authority, can be thought of as a way of establishing proximity. Allen (2016) uses the term 'enrolment' to describe the ability to draw others within close reach. He distinguishes this from what he terms re-embedment, further nuancing how relations of proximity can be mediated. Instead of drawing others inside, as in the case of enrolment, re-embedment involves reaching into actor arrangements and lifting them out of their context, re-embedding them within the orbit of influence. Hence, unlike enrolment, which emphasises inclusion and shared interests, re-embedment produces a sense of immediacy that is more detached, maintaining a degree of separation even as proximity is created.

Stretching to reach (Allen, 2016) involves stretching relations from 'here' to 'there', rather than folding them in from afar. Simply put, presence is established with an actor who is physically or relationally distant. Here, influence is exerted at a distance, often in an indirect manner, making presence felt from a distance. If interpreted topologically, how Ottens and Edelenbos (2018) use of the categories of 'hands-on'/'hands-off' governance to convey that political leadership of governance networks in transitions may entail direct involvement or influence from a distance, can be interpreted as an example of a mediation of presence. Rather than interference in actual operations, strategies that they depict as 'hands-off' surrounding governance networks during transitions, such as setting political goals, legal statutes or storylines, may be viewed as activities to make a presence felt without actually being present. Allen (2016) refers to this form of mediated influence as arm's-length reach, a dynamic that can be just as pervasive as folding in reach, although operating through a different relational logic.

Table 1
Theoretical framework constructed by the authors.

Form	Description	Example
Folding in reach	Drawing distant others into proximity and shared presence through enrolment or by lifting actors out of their context and re-embedding them within an orbit of influence	Pooling of public and private authorities by enlisting intermediaries to encourage action towards sustainability among industry sectors and broader societal actors (Nasiritousi & Grimm, 2022), or, repositioning decentralised practices within centralised government influence
Stretching to reach	Exerting influence at a distance by stretching relations from 'here' to 'there' and thereby making presence felt at arm's-length distance	Political leaders setting goals, legal statutes or storylines for governance networks, without interfering in their actual operations (Ottens & Edelenbos, 2018)
Placing beyond reach	Making what is close appear distant by displacing its presence far away	Politicians transferring sustainability responsibilities to new institutional actors in temporary organisations, distancing these responsibilities from themselves to avoid direct accountability (Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009)

The third form, *placing beyond reach* (Allen, 2016), differs from the previous two in that it does not seek to dissolve distance but rather to produce it. Thus, just as reach can be used to collapse distance, it can also be used to impose it. Something that is close at hand can be made distant by displacing its presence elsewhere. For example, this line of thinking about distance can be read into Sjöblom and Godenhjelm's (2009) concerns that delegating authority and autonomy for temporary organisations to perform sustainability may challenge democratic principles of accountability. They argue that projects can be used as instruments for politicians to avoid liability by transferring the responsibility for achieving transitions to new institutional actors. By positioning certain actors and objects, or responsibilities, as further away and beyond reach, a form of relational distance can be produced.

Hence, these variants of reach can function as a 'visual shorthand' for comprehending how actors make their leverage and presence felt through certain practices of proximity and distance (Griffin, 2012). In this article, we use this terminology (Table 1) to explore relationships between the state and incumbents in the efforts to promote social sustainability in the wild berry industry. Building on previous transition literature adopting the view of the state as a social relation, we recognise the complexity of the state and that it is made up of multiple different actors with sometimes conflicting interests (Painter, 2006). However, our intention is not to define the state at a given moment or around a specific sustainability measure, but rather to attempt to shed light on the dynamic topological interrelationships between state actors and incumbents during transition processes.

3. Case and methods

3.1. The wild berry industry – characterised by complex employment relations and exploitation

The wild berry industry provides an interesting case for studying mediated relations of proximity and distance between the state and incumbents because the regulation of non-timber forest product industries is often entangled in various kinds of laws and policies (Laird et al., 2011). This creates a complex mixture of measures involving a broad range of actors. Moreover, unregulated jobs, such as berry picking, generally result from 'progressively greater legal and physical distance between the worker and the employer' (DeFilippis et al., 2009, pp. 83–84), with legal responsibility either shifted to subcontractors or avoided completely through the misclassification of workers as independent contractors. Thus, these complex employment relations further complicate transition processes in these types of industries, emphasising the need to explore how the interrelationships between state and incumbents are mediated.

Sweden and Finland hold prominent positions within the global wild berry market. Swedish incumbents alone account for approximately 25% of European wild berries on the global market, with an estimated turnover of around 270 million euros each year (Wingborg, 2023). For decades, both countries have relied heavily on pickers from Thailand. Until an abrupt halt in 2024, about 5000 non-EU pickers came to Sweden annually, making them the second largest occupational group of labour migrants (Hammarstedt & Skedinger, 2025; Swedish Migration Agency, 2023a). Finland also depends heavily on Thai labour, with 2000—4000 pickers harvesting up to 90% of the industry's raw materials (Seikkula, 2024). This flow of migrant berry pickers began in the late 20th century, initiated by Thai women living in Sweden who used their social networks to organise labour from their home country (Eriksson & Hedberg, 2022). Gradually, inspired by the ability to bring in migrant workers, incumbents adopted a more formal approach, turning to Thai staffing agencies and recruitment companies to organise their labour supply (Hedberg, 2016). By the early 2000s, this method became dominant within Sweden, partly because it enabled the circumvention of Swedish tax regulations (Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018). Concomitantly, the role of the Thai women altered, as they became intermediaries within this new recruitment structure (van Eerbeek & Hedberg, 2021). In 2005, influenced by Thai pickers' reputation as well-functioning workers and by importing practices from Sweden, Finnish incumbents, who where sometimes active in both countries, also began recruiting Thai pickers (Rantanen & Valkonen, 2011). Thus, in Finland too, assistance from Thai companies became central to recruiting workers.

In Sweden, Thai berry pickers have been employed through staffing agencies based in Thailand, meaning that their employment is formally tied to their home country. In Finland, in contrast, Thai berry pickers have arrived on tourist visas and historically been treated as independent entrepreneurs, lacking any formal employment relationship (Seikkula, 2024). The transnationally stretched employment relationships exacerbate the vulnerability of these workers (Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018). Reports have highlighted issues such as exploitation, precarious working conditions and a high risk of indebtedness. These problems underscore the need for

transformation within the Swedish and Finnish wild berry industries to better protect the rights and well-being of these transnational workers (Haapasaari et al., 2024; Rye & O'Reilly, 2021; Wingborg, 2023; Yimprasert, 2014).

3.2. Methods

This study is limited to examining measures of immigration policy and working-life criminality in the large-scale commercial wild berry industries in Sweden and Finland. In terms of time, it is limited to the last 20 years, starting in 2005 when the use of migrant pickers began to attract governmental interest as a tax review in Sweden led to the widespread use of Thai staffing or recruitment agencies. Both countries have relied on pickers from the same community in Thailand. Pickers have sometimes operated in both countries, and they often decide where to work depending on state policy and incumbents' reputations. There are also incumbent berry companies active in both countries. However, despite these links across borders and being influenced by each other's policy measures, Sweden and Finland have largely pursued different kinds of measures regarding social sustainability for berry pickers. While a Swedish and a Finnish NGO have worked together to protect exploited pickers, policy and state measures have largely been implemented separately within their respective berry industries. To our knowledge, no overview study exploring the different approaches to creating social sustainability for migrant berry pickers in Sweden and Finland exists.

In order to grasp what major initiatives there have been regarding migration regulation and working-life criminality in both countries, the data collection began with a strategic selection of interviews across the berry sector. Nine interviews with Swedish actors were conducted during autumn 2022 and summer 2023, involving representatives from three incumbent berry companies, two membership organisations, the union previously responsible for berry pickers, an NGO, the Swedish Gender and Equality Agency and a journalist. The goal of the interviews was to provide contextual knowledge about how the berry industry has changed over the years, as well as information about specific events of importance. Although the interviews were conducted at the end of the studied period, several interviewees had over a decade of experience in the berry industry and could help to fulfil the interviews' purpose of establishing a timeline of major initiatives for social sustainability in the industry. The interviews were semi-structured, which means they had an open character and questions arose during the conversation (Bryman, 2016). Rather than functioning as questionnaires, the interviews followed a set of themes (see Appendix 1), creating conversations centred around the industry's structure: how it is organised, potential conflicts of interest, how the interviewees viewed their role in the industry and if they had engaged in any way in making the industry more socially sustainable. The interviews with the NGO and the Swedish Gender and Equality Agency also focused particularly on events during the turbulent season of 2022.

Partially informed by the interviews, we then made a strategic selection of documents to cover the main events in the timeline, which resulted in a document analysis that formed the main foundation upon which the article is based. Through these documents, we were able to better understand how major changes in laws and policy directed towards the berry industry were constructed and arranged. The documents analysed included official government reports, bills, recommendations, action plans and national strategies to combat working-life criminality in both Sweden and Finland, as well as investigative reports from civil-society organisations, the unit for operative analysis at the Swedish Migration Agency, the Finnish Ministry of the Interior, the European Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control (HEUNI). The selection also included newspaper articles from both countries and press releases from the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Gender and Equality Agency, the Swedish Prosecution Authority, a Swedish District Court, the Swedish and Finnish Police Authority, the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Finnish Government (See Appendix 2 for a full list of documents).

As well as the document analysis, one of the authors is affiliated with HEUNI, an independent research and policymaking institute functioning under the Finnish Ministry of Justice. In this capacity, the author has been able to draw upon insider knowledge from the work of HEUNI, which has been following the berry industry since 2008. HEUNI has been involved in policy changes regarding the Finnish wild berry industry and has held seminars, workshops and bilateral meetings with Finnish berry industry organisations and incumbent berry companies, as well as with representatives of government authorities, trade unions and NGOs. Both authors have also attended events such as the Nordic Wild Berry Conference and seminars with the Nordic Wild Berry Research and Development Network, where they presented and participated in discussions with a broad range of actors involved in the sector, including scholars from the Nordic countries, incumbents from Sweden and regional representatives from a Finnish Occupational Safety and Health office as well as the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment's employment services.

The gathered data was analysed thematically through an iterative process, involving both predetermined and emerging themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The initial stage of coding focused on identifying the most significant measures within the selected timeframe, with the aim of establishing a timeline and an overview of the involved actors. Then, the analysis moved on to examine how the measures had restructured the industry and changed the relations between those actors who participated in or became affected by them. In the third and final stage, the theoretical framework and spatial analysis took hold as the predetermined themes about relational proximity and distance — stemming from the theoretical framework of folding in reach, stretching to reach and placing beyond reach — were woven together with emerging themes such as collaboration, setting terms and legal actions. Through an iterative process of repeated cycles of coding, but also including further data collection as new measures were taken or new governmental reports published, the second and third stages consolidated into a critical exploration of relationships between state actors and incumbents in efforts to promote social sustainability in the wild berry industry.

4. Working through an empirical example: social sustainability efforts in Sweden's and Finland's wild berry industries

This section explores interactions between state actors and incumbents in their efforts to promote social sustainability in the wild

Table 2
Conceptualisations of measures for social sustainability in the Swedish and Finnish wild berry industries.

Country	Action	Form	Description
Sweden	Introducing work permits for berry pickers	Folding in reach	Drawing an industry organisation into close dialogue and enrolling incumbents to perform migration administration
Sweden	Removing incumbents' influence over migration administration and making them part of the general system, with additional demands	Folding in reach	Lifting incumbents out of the work-permit process and re-embedding them within orbit of influence
Finland	Introducing a letter of intent	Stretching to reach	Exerting influence from a distanced position, making presence felt through arm's-length reach
Finland	Introducing 'berry law'	Stretching to reach	Exerting influence from a distanced position, making presence felt through arm's-length reach
Sweden	Introducing a collective agreement	Folding in reach	Folding incumbents into regulatory reach by enhancing pickers' presence
Sweden	Arranging an informal meeting with berry pickers together with an NGO	Folding in reach	Folding incumbents into regulatory reach by enhancing pickers' presence
Finland	Introducing national helpline	Folding in reach	Folding incumbents into regulatory reach by enhancing pickers' presence
Finland	Hearing exploited berry pickers remotely in court	Folding in reach	Folding incumbents into regulatory reach by enhancing pickers' presence
Sweden	New salary demand and follow-up checks on work permits	Placing beyond reach	Distancing future pickers from incumbents
Finland	Stopping tourist visas and governmental investigation into solutions	Placing beyond reach	Distancing future pickers from incumbents

berry industry. It consists of four parts and uses Allen's (2016) terminology to elucidate how interactions between the state and incumbents in transitions are continuously mediated relations of proximity and distance. The first part shows how Sweden was first to take measures, aimed at folding incumbents in reach in two different ways, while the second part illustrates how Finland followed a few years later with another approach of stretching to reach distanced incumbents. The third and fourth parts then highlight how, in relation to the turbulent season of 2022 and its aftermath, both countries have used strategies to target incumbents with the same intentions albeit in different ways, enhancing exploited berry pickers' presence to fold incumbents into accountability and simultaneously place future berry pickers beyond incumbents' reach. Below is a table of these conceptualisations, in order of appearance in the paper (Table 2).

4.1. Folding in reach: enrolling and re-embedding incumbents

This section illustrates how transition processes can entail relationships of proximity between the state and incumbents, created in different ways. It shows that, between the two countries, Swedish state actors were the first to try to achieve social sustainability by folding incumbent berry companies within reach, establishing a close relationship with an industry organisation as well as enrolling and re-embedding incumbents within the migration administration process. While both strategies — of enrolment and re-embedment — involve folding others within reach to create a shared experience of presence, our research highlights that re-embedment involves a more detached immediacy, showcasing another nuance of how proximity can be achieved.

By the early 2000s, Swedish berry companies had been operating outside general domestic labour-market regulations for decades, partly due to the berry industry's peripheral location (Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2018; Mešić & Wikström, 2021). Due to the high degree of social unrest and lack of regulations, the industry even described itself as the Swedish 'Wild West' (Hedberg & Olofsson, 2022), demonstrating incumbents' perceived distance from state authorities. However, as reliance upon Thai berry pickers grew and their precarious working conditions became apparent, the Swedish Migration Agency decided to take action, seeking to fold incumbent berry companies within its reach and create a sense of shared presence. The first step was to dissolve the distance to incumbents by encouraging the creation of an industry partner with whom the state could discuss potential regulatory measures. Consequently, the Forest Berry Interest Association (Sw. *Skogsbärbranschens Intresseförening*, SBIF) was established. This comprised incumbent berry merchants and companies that held regular meetings with the Swedish Migration Agency and other public authorities (Axelsson et al., 2021). The establishment of SBIF created a mutual presence that enabled negotiations between the state and incumbents to be brokered directly, rather than from afar or across a spatially relational divide. Furthermore, this proximate relationship gave incumbents significant influence over the Swedish berry industry's future structure. In 2007, when the Swedish Migration Agency introduced work permits for berry pickers to fold incumbent berry companies into domestic migration regulations, SBIF successfully advocated for the use of Thai staffing agencies. Through extensive lobbying and meetings with civil servants and leading politicians, SBIF established a consensus that Thai staffing agencies would serve as the pickers' employers. At the time, the Swedish Tax Agency, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Finance Ministry and the Swedish Public Employment Service all recommended this solution (Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2013). Subsequently, thanks to the close-knit relations between the state and the incumbents of SBIF, Thai staffing agencies became the norm in Sweden and remained so for over 15 years.

Not only did the Swedish state draw incumbents into talks about regularisation, it also provided incentives to share responsibility for the new work-permit system, intensifying the interdependence with incumbent berry companies (Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018). The Swedish state deliberately enrolled SBIF by shifting previous public responsibilities onto the industry organisation and folding incumbents into an even closer relationship of heightened presence. For a few years, for example, SBIF determined the criteria for

inviting berry pickers and had formal control over which berry companies were permitted to import pickers to Sweden (Hedberg & Olofsson, 2022). Thus, SBIF was tasked with responsibility to oversee the migration administration process, performing tasks typically under the Migration Agency's purview, and exerted significant influence on the work-permit process. According to the media, the head of the Migration Agency's permit unit later admitted that this was a special arrangement for berry pickers, and the reason behind it was that 'there had been neither unions nor employers in the industry to talk to' (Jacobsson, 2009, n.p.). As a result, the state and incumbents became increasingly dependent upon each other in their efforts to ensure that the industry transitioned towards more socially sustainable outcomes. In a spatial sense, we argue, this enrolment strategy folded incumbent berry companies further within the state's reach, creating proximate relationships characterised by a shared co-presence between the state and incumbents.

However, due to the continued exploitation of berry pickers highlighted both by the media and in research (see e.g. NAT, 2011; Vogiazides & Hedberg, 2013; Wingborg, 2011; Woolfson et al., 2011), the enrolment of incumbents soon came to an end. In 2011, the Migration Agency's head of operations stated that 'the individual's right to fair conditions must take precedence over any special interests' (Holm, 2011, n.p.), and the previously enrolled incumbents were lifted out of the work-permit process as SBIF's influence was revoked. Instead, the Swedish Migration Agency tried a less immediate approach to folding incumbents within reach, namely re-embedding incumbents and their work-permit applications within the same general administrative process as all other work-permit applications, albeit with some sector-specific amendments (Hedberg & Olofsson, 2022). Hence, rather than performing the administrative process themselves and dictating conditions from the inside, incumbents were re-embedded within the Migration agency's orbit of influence. By positioning incumbent berry companies on equal terms with all other employers importing workers from abroad, but with some additional requirements, the Swedish state maintained a shared presence and kept the incumbents proximate, albeit through a more detached strategy than the previous enrolment. By re-embedding berry companies in this way, the Migration Agency also sought to co-opt incumbents to enforce Swedish regulations on the berry pickers' actual employers, i.e. the Thai staffing agencies (Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018). In order to bring berry pickers to Sweden, incumbents were now required to demonstrate their ability to pay workers in advance. Thus, although the Thai staffing agencies remained formal employers, and were obliged to register a local branch in Sweden, incumbents became responsible for demonstrating their ability to provide salaries and sound working conditions.

4.2. Stretching to reach: exercising arm's-length reach through sector-specific arrangements

This section illustrates how state actors can exert influence over incumbents at a distance during transition processes. Stretching to reach new spaces of enforcement, the Finnish state has sought to establish its presence among relationally distant incumbents, operating through a different logic than when proximity is created.

In Finland, as in Sweden, incumbent berry companies initially operated relatively undisturbed outside regulatory authority. Then in the 2000s, reports of migrant exploitation prompted the Finnish state to take measures towards social sustainability (Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2007). However, despite consensus regarding the need for better oversight and external auditing, there was initially significant disagreement among Finnish state actors about whether the incumbents should be allowed to continue to work from their distanced position or if they could be considered employers. This led to different views on appropriate measures and, compared to Sweden, it took longer before measures were taken (Rantanen & Valkonen, 2011). The Finnish Ministry of the Interior (2007), for example, recommended no legislative changes, while the Ombudsman for Minorities (now the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman) proposed stricter measures, folding incumbents close by only granting visas to companies that could pay the pickers' travel and accommodation costs, as well as minimum wage (Finnish Ombudsman for Minorities, 2010). Eventually, in 2014, a cross-administrative working group clarified two alternatives to the issue: either bringing incumbents into full employer responsibilities or treating them outside current statues with special legislation (Wallin, 2014). In its final report, the working group concluded that making incumbents into employers would be preferable, as a separate law is always a bad option and should be avoided.

Despite it being deemed preferable that incumbents be folded into employer liability, the Finnish state instead, in the same year, stretched to reach relationally distant incumbents through a sector-specific arrangement. Introducing a letter of intent procedure in 2014, after significant lobbying from incumbents, the Finnish state sought to establish a presence within the industry from an arm's-length distance. Its aim was to improve berry pickers' situation and earning potential without imposing any legal changes on incumbents (Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2014). This letter of intent forced incumbents to commit to certain procedures; for example, regarding housing standards, recruitment costs and supervision for pickers (Seikkula, 2024). But 'the purpose of the letter of intent, however, was not to influence how berry pickers' employment status was assessed' (Finnish Working Life and Equality Committee, 2014, p. 6). Consequently, incumbents were not drawn into general labour-market regulations for employers; rather, they could continue to operate outside them while the Finnish state sought to make its presence felt at a distance. Thus, the letter of intent entailed a presence of a less intense nature. For example, incumbents were allowed to continue to rely on tourist visas for their migrant workers, and the Finnish state maintained a certain distance from incumbents, exercising arm's-length reach.

In Finland, as in Sweden, continuing problems of exploitation prompted a second wave of measures to ensure social sustainability within the berry industry. Yet, in contrast to the Swedish approach of folding incumbents close, Finland continued down the path of stretching to reach incumbents at arm's-length distance through a specific labour-market arrangement. In 2021, despite earlier reservations about industry-specific laws, Finland passed the so-called 'berry law', which stated that 'an actor within the natural product picking industry must be reliable. Anyone who is not reliable may not operate as an actor within the natural product picking industry' (Finnish Government, 2021b, p. 2). This law stretched to reach distant incumbents to ensure their reliability by clarifying certain obligations, such as providing picking equipment, proper housing, information regarding salaries and opportunities for legal aid. It also gave the Finnish Occupational Health and Safety Authority supervisory rights over incumbents (Finnish Government, 2021a;

Finnish Occupational Safety and Health Authority, 2024a). However, the berry law only imposed a form of absent presence because it did not burden incumbents with full employer liability and only approved limited oversight, excluding aspects such as working hours, working conditions or any minimum wage (Finnish Occupational Safety and Health Authority, 2024b). Crucially, it did not draw incumbents into general labour-market obligations, but rather set certain standards from a distance through arm's-length reach, allowing incumbents to continue to rely upon the use of tourist visas for their workers who were considered independent entrepreneurs. Consequently, the Finnish state replaced the letter of intent and instead used the 'berry law' to impose its presence in a stretched fashion. While the 'berry law' aimed to enforce certain standards more stringently, it allowed incumbent berry companies to continue to operate according to the industry's historically evolved separate structure, maintaining a degree of distance without the full regulatory integration of incumbents.

Having so far dealt with the Swedish and Finnish states separately, we next explore how both countries have, in slightly different ways and with varying degrees of success, attempted to draw workers close and heighten their presence within their respective countries in order to indirectly target dubious incumbents and fold them into accountability and regulatory reach.

4.3. Folding in reach: targeting incumbents by enhancing the presence of exploited workers

In general, both the Swedish and Finnish states have faced difficulties holding incumbent berry companies liable for exploitative practices. Stemming from the seasonal character of the industry, berry pickers are often absent from preliminary investigations, having already returned home when investigations are initiated. In addition, the short season in combination with high travel and recruitment costs, creates a high risk of indebtedness among pickers and strong dependence upon incumbent employers, which, according to one interviewee, leads pickers to refrain from asserting their rights or only speaking to the authorities when they are very close to returning home:

> *When we've met berry pickers and they've described their situation… [the fact] that they haven't dared to speak to the authorities at the beginning of the season has partly been due to their debts, the risk of being sent home, or the possibility of facing reprisals [from incumbent berry companies, authors' note] in one way or another.* (Representative of the Swedish Gender and Equality agency)

In response, both the Swedish and Finnish states have made various efforts to strengthen berry pickers' presence in order to enforce social sustainability and, by extension, fold incumbents into accountability and regulatory reach. Historically, Sweden has relied upon the 'Swedish model', which emphasises negotiations between labour unions and employers, to ensure social sustainability within the workforce. In 2010, berry pickers became included in the agricultural workers' collective agreement in an attempt to strengthen their presence even though they are not paid-up union members (Hedberg & Olofsson, 2022). Yet, this model does not fully consider the unique challenges faced by migrant workers, especially berry pickers, and its effectiveness has been questioned due to the lack of control mechanisms or sanctions for non-compliance. These have left berry pickers in a form of subordinated inclusion and absent presence within the Swedish labour market (Emilsson, 2014; Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2013; Tollefsen et al., 2020). Finland, in contrast, has used different strategies to mediate berry pickers' presence and fold incumbents into reach, making them take responsibility for their actions. Having a more comprehensive policy regarding human trafficking and labour exploitation than Sweden (SOU, 2023:8; Spanger et al., 2024), Finland has more successfully enabled berry pickers to remain in the country while potential crimes are investigated, but it has also intensified their presence through a national system of assistance for victims of human trafficking, specialised police, and specialised court practices. This has led to more convictions of incumbent berry companies (Jokinen et al., 2023; Yle News, 2024b).

These differences between Sweden and Finland became clear during the turbulent season of 2022, when exploitation in the industry surfaced yet again. In Finland, the CEO of an incumbent berry company and their Thai business partner were prosecuted and later convicted on 62 counts of aggravated human trafficking (Swedish Yle, 2025; Yle News, 2024a). By establishing connections with exploited pickers both before and after they returned home and hearing them remotely in court, regardless of the distance span, the Finnish state was able to make the berry pickers' presence felt and fold the incumbent berry company into accountability (Yle News, 2024b). During the same season, another incumbent, who was later convicted in a bribery scandal (Torvalds, 2024; Yle News, 2024c), was also prosecuted for human trafficking in Finland (P4 Norrbotten, 2024; SVT, 2024). Since this incumbent operated in both Finland and Sweden, the Swedish Migration Agency filed a police report of human trafficking against the incumbent's Swedish affiliate (Wingborg, 2022). However, while the trial is still ongoing in Finland, the Swedish case was dropped after only 20 days because the berry pickers had already left the country. Consequently, due to the absence of plaintiffs and an inability to enable the presence of those physically distant, the Swedish state failed to draw the incumbent into liability and regulatory reach.

Another key difference between the countries is Finland's national helpline for seasonal workers and berry pickers who are victims of human trafficking (Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2024a). This helpline is an advisory service specifically intended to strengthen berry pickers' presence by providing legal advice and, if necessary, referral to the relevant authorities (RIKU, 2024). The Swedish state has faced criticism for lacking such a helpline specialising in human trafficking (SOU, 2023:8). In fact, during the turbulent season of 2022, the organisation behind the Finnish helpline played an important role in heightening pickers' presence in Sweden. A Swedish NGO worker described it as follows:

> *When providing support in the process against an incumbent over there, the Finnish victim support became aware that there were berry pickers in Sweden who had tried to seek support from Swedish authorities, but not been heard. So they referred the pickers to me… Several of the pickers working in Sweden had contacted another NGO, stationed in Finland but of Thai descent. So then there* developed *a collaboration between us.* (Representative of Swedish NGO)

Connected through Finland's state-financed victim support, the Swedish and Finnish NGOs began working together. The network of NGOs targeting human trafficking is more developed in Finland and activists from the Thai diaspora have played an important role in establishing berry pickers' presence and organising their fight for pickers' rights (Seikkula, 2024). Together, the two NGOs gathered testimonies from around 250 berry pickers in Sweden and thus increased pickers' presence in the country. Their work resulted in several police reports against Swedish incumbents and Thai staffing agencies, including Sweden's largest ever preliminary investigation into human trafficking (Björkland, 2025). Yet again, few pickers were identified before they left Sweden, complicating the investigation, which remains ongoing three years later.

While the season of 2022 has yet to result in any convictions in Sweden, the events still led to the Swedish authorities seeking new ways of mediating berry pickers' presence and folding incumbents into accountability. For example, in 2023, together with the NGO previously engaged, the Swedish Gender and Equality Agency arranged a local meeting with pickers (Stormare, 2023). A representative from the Swedish Gender and Equality agency said:

> *It ended up with me and my colleague travelling up and borrowing a room at the cultural centre and sitting there one evening to make this possible… That was the difference, from the previous year, that we created a place where they could come, that we'd sent out information that there was help to be found. And that some were brave and came, gained trust in us and that there actually was help available.* (Representative of the Swedish Gender and Equality agency)

This initiative came after the public authorities had detected poor housing and excessive working hours during joint workplace inspections, and the involved pickers did not feel comfortable talking to the police (Swedish Police Authority, 2024; Swedish Work Environment Agency, 2024). This initiative, which in a Swedish context was non-customary, to strengthen pickers' presence by creating an informal setting to speak freely enabled nine pickers to assist in a preliminary investigation before they left to return home (Swedish Prosecution Authority, 2024). In the end, the pickers were able to make their presence felt and the incumbent was folded into regulatory reach, as the case led to Sweden's first ever conviction for the human exploitation of berry pickers from Thailand (Swedish Equality and Gender Agency, 2024; Swedish Prosecution Authority, 2024). In addition, the case fuelled investigations regarding the events of 2022, contributing to representatives from the Swedish Police Authority travelling to Thailand to interview victims (Björklund, 2025; Sveriges Radio, 2025).

4.4. Placing beyond reach: distancing future workers out of incumbents' reach

By describing practices of producing distance, this section highlights how relations during transition processes may be mediated in ways other than by creating proximity between actors. Contrasting with the previous section, it shows how, in the aftermath of the 2022 season, both the Swedish and the Finnish states have simultaneously, although in different ways, placed future workers beyond incumbents' reach. By placing future pickers behind a legal architecture through changes in migration regulations, both governments have distanced berry pickers from incumbents and made it more difficult to recruit them. The intention has been to protect pickers from both precariousness and dubious incumbents by constructing distance between them.

In Finland, the state tried something it had previously done when pickers from Vietnam had been exploited; namely, to distance pickers from incumbents by temporarily stopping the granting of visas from the country in question (Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2007; Rantanen & Valkonen, 2011). This time, the decision was based on the serious incidents during previous years, but also the discovery of contractual arrangements that did not follow the Finnish model. As the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024) stated in a press release:

> *The granting of visas for berry pickers has been based on the assumption that pickers travel to Finland for a purpose comparable to tourism, picking wild berries based on the right to public access and selling them to the incumbent of their choice. However, this assumption has proven to be incorrect in practice. For example, it has been common to conclude employment contracts with the berry pickers.* (Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024, n.p.)

Therefore, for the 2024 season, the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided that no Schengen visas should be granted by the Finnish embassy in Bangkok, thus hindering Thai berry pickers from coming to Finland and distancing them from potentially exploitative incumbents (Sparv, 2024). The goal was to temporarily halt the flow of berry pickers and place them out of the incumbents' reach until proper labour rights could be ensured, a solution that some berry pickers themselves had demanded during demonstrations in Thailand (Prachatai, 2024). During the blockade, an investigation into solutions proposed changes in migration policy and a permanent stop to picking berries commercially on tourist visas in Finland (Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2024c). As of February 2025, berry picking by non-EU migrants involves seasonal work permits and must be carried out under a formal contractual employment relationship (Finland Abroad, 2025; Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2024b).

In Sweden, the state took a slightly different approach, but with the same intention of creating distance between incumbents and berry pickers. However, rather than temporarily closing the door to Thai berry pickers altogether, the Swedish state pushed future pickers further away from incumbents by introducing bureaucratic hurdles with the motivation that only reliable berry companies would then be able to recruit pickers. In 2023, the Swedish Migration Agency introduced a new maintenance requirement for all labour migrants applying for a work permit, set substantially higher than the current one in the berry pickers' collective agreement (SOU, 2024:15). The government's intention was to place pickers beyond the reach of financially challenged incumbents. In the same year as the new salary demand, the Swedish Migration Agency also began using a new method to improve the implementation of existing policy; namely, to perform follow-up checks among incumbents who were granted work permits (Swedish Migration Agency, 2023a).

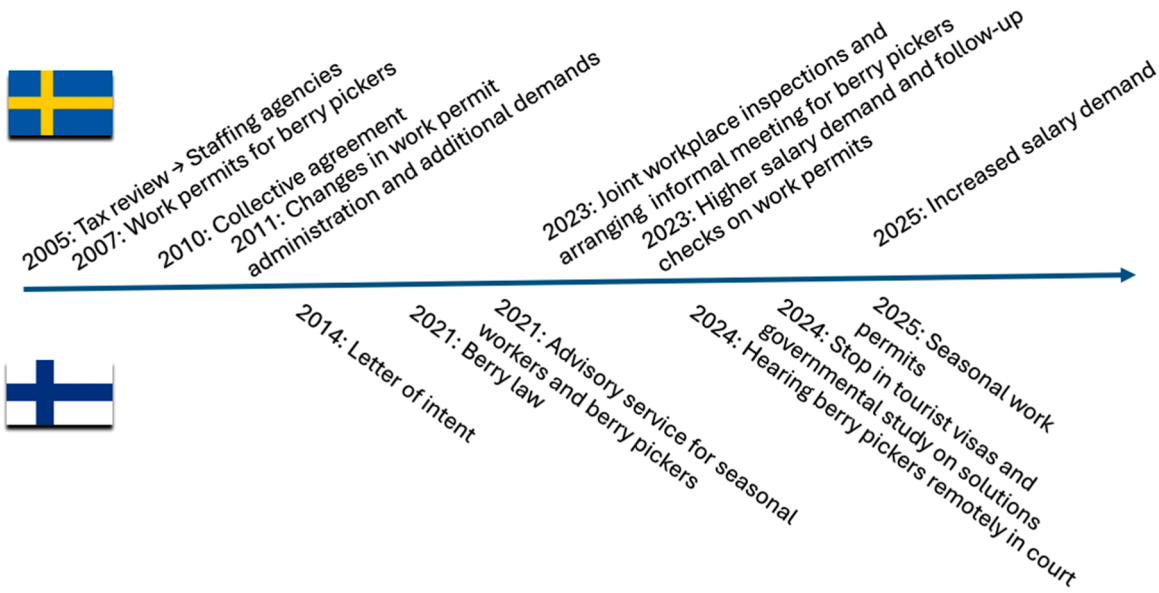

Fig. 1. Measures for social sustainability in the Swedish and Finnish wild berry industries.

The Swedish Migration Agency (2023b) described the intention behind these follow-up checks as follows:

> *This will primarily affect employers and incumbents in Sweden, and how we will assess their work permit applications in the future. This means that there is a higher risk of rejection. It is the individual berry picker who risks being rejected, but the opportunities to apply for other types of permits or work permits from another employer are not negatively affected for the individual.* (The Swedish Migration Agency, 2023b, n.p.)

Revoking work permits had previously been assessed as an insufficient measure to penalise incumbent berry companies, since permits had often expired and the pickers had already left the country by the time wrongdoings were detected (Swedish Migration Agency, 2024c). Instead, the follow-up checks served as a basis for future applications, functioning as a tool to improve the Migration Agency's decision-making and ensure distance between berry pickers and dubious berry companies. Their implementation also led to both substantially fewer applications for berry picking and a significantly higher number of rejections during the following seasons (Swedish Migration Agency, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). Thus, both countries have sought to place new workers beyond the reach of incumbents, distancing them in order to prevent further exploitation (Fig. 1).

5. Discussion and conclusion

The early transition literature, which was characterised by a bottom-up perspective that viewed incumbents as actors resistant to change high up in the hierarchy, has come to be questioned by scholars. They now argue that transition work extends across multiple scales and that incumbents can play different roles, both proactive and passive, at various levels (Kungl, 2024; Saleh, 2025). In this article, guided by the notion that actor relations are inherently spatial, we have diverted attention away from determining the scales at which actors may operate during transition processes. Instead, we have focused on the relational arrangements of which the various actors, such as incumbents, are a part. In doing so, we are addressing previous concerns that the conceptualisations of actor relations in transition literature are characterised by a priori scalar hierarchies and fixed boundaries (Binz et al., 2014). We are thus zooming in on the very substance of the connections between actors in transitions, rather than the establishment of their existence or their extensions. This enables a deeper understanding of the relational politics in sustainability transitions — in this case, how the state and incumbents interact with each other, directly or indirectly — and reveals the qualitative changes in the interplay between them.

Thus, we are also contributing to a deeper knowledge of the role of the state in sustainability transitions, building on earlier remarks in the transition literature arguing that the state should be treated as a social relation, a contingent ensemble of entwined political actors, some public, some private, and advocating less focus on normative ideas about what the state ought to be (Silvester & Fisker, 2023). The spatially relational perspective for which we argue in this article contributes another layer, extending beyond establishing the state's contingent construction and entwined nature to depict the topological twists of political authority. It highlights that interactions between state actors and incumbents are continuously mediated relations of proximity and distance, and by extension reveals that sustainability transitions are made up of, and gain their form through, a variety of spatial dynamics between the involved actors. Since a neglect of the state's and incumbents' spatial dimensions runs the risk of leaving them floating freely in space (Coenen et al., 2012), drawing attention to the intrinsic spatiality of their relational arrangements contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how such arrangements between the state and incumbents take shape and convey meaning.

The spatially relational perspective that we propose in this article also provides insights into the geography of transition literature

that draws upon relational proximity, highlighting how proximity and distance are actively mediated parts of actor relationships and leveraged topologically.

The comparison of measures in the Swedish and Finnish wild berry industries reveals several different variants of how relationships imbued spatialities can be distorted. While Nasiritousi and Grimm (2022) describe how the state can enlist intermediaries to pursue common sustainability policy goals, we bring nuance to the proximity involved in such tactics. For example, by analysing the enrolment and subsequent re-embedment of the industry organisation and incumbents within the Swedish migration administration process, we have depicted how proximate relations can be reproduced in more than one way. Underlining how presence and absence may be reconfigured differently, we have shown that relations of proximity can involve varying degrees of intensity and immediacy.

In addition, we have illuminated how spatial configurations can build upon mechanisms other than trust, which Murphy (2015) argues can enable relational proximity. Rather than trust, efforts to fold incumbents within reach in both Sweden and Finland have been based on the intention to create accountability and hold incumbents liable for exploitative practices. Measures of proximity have targeted dubious and relationally distant incumbents that previously worked outside regulatory control in order to enforce social sustainability. Moreover, as our case suggests, when initial measures fail to bring about broader change, relational proximity alone may not necessarily lead to a transition. Exploring the wild berry industry through a spatially relational perspective, we have captured how relational proximity, or distance, is negotiated in different ways and that transition processes imply a multitude of spatial reworkings. We have shown how ways to fold in reach, stretch to reach or place beyond reach are not mutually exclusive or exercised in isolation, but may occur simultaneously, overlap and play off each other. This enables a deeper understanding of interactions between actors in transition processes and provides insight into how sustainability transitions play out in practice. Still, in this article, we have not exhausted all the topological shifts involved in transitions. Further research on the geography of transitions could delve more deeply into the spatial configurations of actor relations, and the mechanisms behind them. Future research could, for instance, investigate the spatially mediated relations of actor constellations other than state—incumbent ones or explore how multiple actors relate to one another simultaneously.

The wild berry industry also presents a novel empirical case in relation to previous transition research. In general, sustainability transition literature has been characterised by a substantial focus on energy transitions (Hansmeier et al., 2021). Hence, we align with research arguing for a broader empirical focus and the inclusion of areas such as food and agriculture in the transition literature (Hinrichs, 2014). In addition, our explicit focus on social sustainability contributes to a greater recognition of social justice issues, which are otherwise often treated as below-the-radar outcomes of transitions (Avelino et al., 2024; Köhler et al., 2019).

Although efforts have been made to improve the situation for migrant berry pickers, one clear concern arising from our study is whether the industry will ever be fully socially sustainable. This is particularly true in Sweden, where the government has recently proposed a new law to prohibit labour migrants from outside the EU from entering certain occupations, berry picker being one (The Swedish Government, 2025). Excluding one kind of labour migrant for an indefinite period of time can be robustly questioned from a social sustainability perspective (Axelsson, 2025), not least because it does not ensure adequate conditions for those who take their place. Another limitation of our study is the lack of a Thai perspective. Our interviews were conducted with incumbents rather than pickers and the focus has been on the receiving states of labour migration. Further research could delve more deeply into the sending state, i.e. Thailand, which has regulated outgoing migration for berry picking (Härmälä, 2024). Future research could also focus on aspects beyond the formal or legal dimensions of social sustainability to further explore the implementation of transition policies and, for example, the increased use of projects as a way to achieve sustainability.

From a policy perspective, we have shown in this article how the Swedish and Finnish states have encouraged cooperation with incumbents in order to foster social sustainability through joint initiatives or sectoral agreements, while emphasising the need for control mechanisms. In the seasonal berry-picking industry, this entails a shift from disciplining incumbents via worker deportation to a victim-centred approach with access to remedy and establishing accountability. Exit surveys for seasonal workers, linked to work permits or retrieved through QR codes, could be a way to ensure this. In Sweden, a national helpline for seasonal workers would be a first step, one that also targets EU pickers, who may increase in numbers and are harder to reach. In general, both states have acted separately, and could benefit from sharing experiences, as they face overlapping incumbents, pickers and challenges.

Funding

This work was supported by the Formas [grant number 2021–02226].

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nils Pettersson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Natalia Ollus:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the research participants for generously sharing their experiences and Charlotta Hedberg and Carina Keskitalo, Umeå University, as well as Linn Axelsson, Stockholm University, for comments on an earlier draft. The authors would also like to thank the reviewers for their insightful comments.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.eist.2026.101131.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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