

# Renewing the engagement of young people in farming in Thailand: Possible pathways

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The engagement of young people in farming has been declining in Thailand. This is most obvious when considering farm holders, as agricultural censuses show that the number of young farm holders has dropped considerably over the last two decades, and this is also the case for agricultural labourers (Podhisita, 2017). Local studies in Thailand (e.g. Rigg et al., 2008, 2018) reported young people are staying away from farming. Many young people from a farming family prefer a non-agricultural income, which they can obtain without leaving their home villages or alternatively, through migration (Nilsen, 2014). However, the decline in engagement in farming is not the same everywhere: young people can still be found on farms that are part of profitable value chains and, in some villages, young people occasionally support their parents on the family farm (Rigg et al., 2019). But clearly the overall image is that fewer and fewer young people are present in the fields and that they are less and less involved in decision-making in family farms. Similar trends have been identified in other newly industrialized countries of Asia (e.g. Indonesia, the Philippines), although more local studies are needed to detail changes in the way young people engage (or not) in farming.

These trends contribute to an ageing farmer population, whose consequences are the cause of concern (Bhandari and Mishra, 2018). This is an important point, even though the impacts of an ageing farmer population (on the agricultural sector and on rural areas) deserve more investigation. In any case, like in other newly industrialized Asian countries, the Thai agricultural sector is facing major changes. What is needed is a look ahead while reconsidering the social, economic, environmental and other roles the agricultural sector can play in the future. Possible scenarios include the renewed engagement of young people in farming. In Thailand, the government has repeatedly announced renewed engagement of young people in farming to be a major objective. Building such scenarios would benefit from a shift in viewpoint that not only focuses on the reasons why young people do not engage in farming, but also analyses the ways young people do get involved in farming under prevailing conditions (White, 2015) and how they could get involved if the conditions were improved.

This mini-special issue contributes to this much-needed debate by outlining pathways towards enhanced engagement of young people in farming in Thailand. The articles build linkages between what is happening now and what

could happen in the future. The articles analyse the types of farming young people engage in or would envisage becoming engaged in if support were available, the difficulties young people face – or think they may face in the future – when they start farming, and what kind of support could be provided. The articles take stock of different viewpoints: those of young rural people (Ruiz Salvago et al., 2019) and of agriculture students (Filloux et al., 2019) concerning their current and possibly future engagement in farming; those of existing young farmers about their experience (Phiboon et al., 2019); and those of a wide diversity of actors about possible policies to support young people who wish to start farming or who would be ready to do so under improved conditions (Faysse et al., 2019).

The term ‘young farmer’ used in this mini-special issue requires clarifying. First, being a (part-time or full-time) farmer is understood here as being the owner of the farm capital and being involved in making decisions concerning the farm, either independently or as part of a group (usually the family). Second, there are many definitions of ‘young’ farmer (White, 2012). The articles in this special issue do not limit themselves to a single definition. Ruiz Salvago et al. (2019) and Filloux et al. (2019) interviewed people aged under 24, Phiboon et al. (2019) used a 40-year-old age limit and Faysse et al. (2019) reviewed policies which use many different definitions (e.g. policies in the European Union are based on a 40-year age limit, while in Thailand, the limit is set at 45 years). Actually, more than a specific age limit, what is important is the young peoples’ circumstances, that is, being at an early stage of professional life, usually still being very mobile and having had few opportunities to gather resources.

Firstly, these four articles debunk the widely held belief that young rural people in Thailand do not engage in farming because they see no future in it, especially compared to available opportunities in other sectors. Many of the young people interviewed indeed said they were not interested in farming given the prevailing constraints and lack of opportunities. However, they said they would be ready to consider farming if the conditions were improved. The conditions they described were not particularly unrealistic but, for those who already planned to farm, it often involved a long process to assemble the resources they needed. Secondly, the articles show the dynamism of young farmers in Thailand, if not by numbers, at least in terms of their innovativeness and in the

variety of objectives they had for their farms. Thirdly, several policies and initiatives have been introduced at local level to support young farmers in Thailand, but they are still very modest in terms of the number of beneficiaries and the range of support provided. Future policies and initiatives should not only support young people who are already engaged in farming, but also those who already plan to do so, as well as those who would be interested if being a farmer were to become more attractive.

Surprisingly, despite major differences in socio-economic contexts, some of the findings in this mini-special issue recall what is happening in other parts of the world. Like in Europe and Japan, young Thai farmers are increasingly adopting diverse farming models, not only farming systems per se, but also in the way they combine farming and non-farming activities. There is thus an urgent need to discuss what it means for a young Thai person to make a living from farming. This debate could be part of a broader debate about the future of farm structures in Thailand. Based on recognition of the diversity of farmers' situations and goals, farming models are needed that make sense to farmers and justify the time and efforts they invest in farming. This discussion would also be valid in Africa, where agriculture is often seen as a promising sector to provide livelihoods for the new generations, and in Europe, where the widely called-for shift to farming practices that have no negative impact on the environment needs to be part of a wider process that protects farmers' livelihoods.

The articles in this mini-special issue reveal that opportunities exist to support renewed engagement in farming by young people in Thailand. Seizing these opportunities will require ambitious policies and initiatives at local level. The design of these policies and these initiatives would benefit considerably from young peoples' views and proposals, and they should be given the opportunity to express them.

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