

Young people's willingness to farm under present and improved conditions in Thailand

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Outlook on Agriculture
1–10

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DOI: 10.1177/0030727019880189

journals.sagepub.com/home/oag



Abstract

Studies of young people's willingness to farm usually analyse their plans based on the resources available to them, or their hopes if they had access to more resources, but rarely study the two jointly. However, in newly industrialized countries in Asia, such joint assessments are needed to disentangle the extent to which young people's limited involvement in farming is due to lack of interest or to the fact that they see no way to get round the obstacles to starting the kind of farming they want to practice. This study analysed the vision of 86 young rural people in Prachinburi Province, Thailand, concerning farming, their plan to farm under prevailing conditions and their willingness to become a farmer if more opportunities to start farming were available. More than two-thirds of the interviewees were not farming at the time of the interview, but half planned to start farming, either part or full time, in the coming decade. One-third of the interviewees said that if they had better opportunities to start farming, they would reconsider their current plans to work in non-agricultural sectors and instead become full-time farmers. Public policies aimed at increasing the number of young people who become farmers should consequently not take the prevailing lack of engagement in farming by many young rural people as a given. Such policies should not only support young people who already plan to farm, but also those who would be willing to farm if they had better opportunities to do so.

Keywords

Aspirations, opportunity space, rural youth, Thailand, willingness to farm

Introduction

Young farmers' role in the future of agriculture in newly industrialized countries of Asia

In several newly industrialized countries in Asia, the involvement of young people in agricultural production has been decreasing over at least the past two decades. In Indonesia, the proportion of the agricultural labour force under 35 decreased from 20% in 2003 to 12.9% in 2013 (Susilowati, 2014). A similar trend has been identified in China (Ji et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018) and in the Philippines (Moya et al., 2015). This trend, along with the ageing of the population as a whole (Chomik and Piggott, 2015), contributes to the ageing of the farming population. The same trend is emerging particularly rapidly in Thailand. Young people's lack of engagement in agricultural production in Thailand is not new (Funahashi, 1996) but has considerably accelerated in recent decades (Rigg et al., 2012; Suphannachart, 2017). In particular, according to the 2003 and 2013 agricultural censuses, farm holders aged less than 45 decreased from 2.6 million in 2003 to 1.4 million in 2013, that is, a decrease of 46%.

The reasons usually given for the declining engagement of young people in agricultural production in newly

industrialized countries of Asia are 'pull' and 'push' factors. A key pull factor is the availability of non-farm income-generating activities, for instance based on temporary or permanent migration to work in factories (Li et al., 2013; Peou, 2016). In northeastern Thailand, many people start farming in their late 40s or 50s, after having worked for some years in industry (Rigg et al., 2014). In Thailand, even young people who remain in rural areas are increasingly earning a non-farming income (Rigg et al., 2019). Push factors relate, for instance, to the difficulty in accessing land, the quest to be independent from their parents, the general limited profitability of farming (Rigg et al., 2016) or the willingness of farming parents to see their

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children in non-farming jobs (Manalo and van de Fliert, 2013). Another frequently cited reason is young people's negative perception of farming (Morarji, 2014; Rigg et al., 2018).

Young people can be involved in agricultural production as farm workers or employees, or as farmers, that is, as owners of the farm capital and involved in making decisions concerning the farm, either independently or as part of a group, usually their family. In the present situation, the declining engagement of young people as farmers in newly industrialized Asian countries is problematic. Several studies identified the consequences of the ageing of farmers: ageing farmers tend to only use extensive practices (Ji et al., 2017) and the changes in farming practices due to ageing can reduce agricultural productivity (Saiyut et al., 2017; Seok et al., 2018). Studies in Thailand showed that ageing farmers often rely on hired labour, which pushes up production costs (Formoso, 2016; Pongchompu et al., 2012). In China, the ageing of the farming population already contributes to land abandonment (Li et al., 2018). The reasons for these changes are not necessarily related to the capacities of ageing farmers per se, but rather to the fact that older farmers are less ready to spend time and effort on improving their farming system than young people (Kaewanan, 2016).

The involvement of elder people in farming does not only have negative consequences. In Thailand, agriculture plays a major role in providing food and complementary income for elderly people with insufficient pensions (Kaewanan, 2016; Rigg et al., 2019). Moreover, in the past two decades, rural households appeared to be resilient to the decreased profitability of farming, particularly thanks to the expansion of non-farming activities (Salamanca and Rigg, 2017). Consequently, the agricultural sector has not yet been strongly affected by the ageing of the farming population.

However, current resilience has limitations. First, several types of farming systems have become trapped in a situation of limited profitability (Faysse, 2017). This is particularly the case of small-scale farms, which mainly produce rice. Because of their limited profitability, the owners of these farms do not want to spend time farming, and make little effort to change their farming system, which, in turn, limits possibilities to improve farm profitability (Kasem and Thapa, 2011; Rigg et al., 2019). Young farmers do not want to start working on these farms as they see little opportunity to improve their income (Rigg et al., 2018). Second, the number of young farmers has decreased very rapidly in recent years and the situation is thus not evolving towards stable livelihood systems combining farming and non-farming income-generating activities. It is not certain that the future generation will consider their emotional ties with family land sufficiently strong to continue farming in the same way as their predecessors (Rigg et al., 2018).

If the share of farms managed by elder farmers increases in the future, there is a risk the supply of agricultural products to value chains will decrease. Bhandari and Mishra (2018) even argue that the ageing of farmers will jeopardize food security in several Asian countries. To face this challenge, the Thai government has designed a strategy for the

agriculture sector for the period 2017–2036 (Office of Agricultural Economics, 2017) emphasizing that agriculture should remain a key social and economic component of society. This strategy includes the goal of helping young farmers to set up. Helping young farmers to set up their own farms would also have another benefit. Young people represent a large proportion of the labour force in the industrial sectors of Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia (Nag et al., 2018) but the jobs they find are often insecure (Rigg et al., 2014). Supporting young people in setting up their own farms is one possible option, among others, to provide more stable livelihoods for young generations.

However, policies to help young people become farmers are still emerging in Thailand (Faysse et al., 2019). One obstacle to the implementation of such policies is the widely held view that young people are not interested in farming, because they consider farming is a low-status activity with no prestige, and because they think that income from farming is much lower than what they could earn in non-agricultural sectors (Office of Agricultural Economics, 2017; Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2011).

Approaches to analyse young people's willingness to farm

In the last decade, increasing attention has been paid to the willingness of the rural youth to farm (Asciutti et al., 2016; Eissler and Brennan, 2015). Empirical studies of young people's willingness to farm have mainly been conducted in Europe and in Africa, but far fewer in Asia. Two main approaches have been used. With the first approach, studies generally assess young people's aspirations, which they define as what young people plan to achieve given their perception of their opportunity space, that is, the range of possibilities available to them to establish an independent life, in the context of prevailing constraints and opportunities (Sumberg et al., 2012). One factor structuring young rural people's opportunity space is their ability to access resources, such as land, capital and farming knowledge (FAO, 2014; White, 2012).

Studies have used the first approach to explore rural youth's intentions to get involved in farming in Africa (Daum, 2018; Yeboah et al., 2017). Bezu and Holden (2014) and Gella (2013) showed that young women often preferred to look for urban employment compared to their male counterparts, because farming was seen as a male occupation and because inheriting family land proved more difficult for women. These two studies also showed that young rural people who managed to get a diploma generally aimed to get non-agricultural jobs. Other studies specifically focused on the willingness of young people whose parents were farmers to get involved and subsequently to take over the family farm. They identified factors that influenced this willingness, including internal factors (e.g. birth order, gender and labour market conditions, Cavicchioli et al., 2018) and external factors that influence the children's and their families perceptions and beliefs (Morais et al., 2017, 2018). Finally, the studies provided evidence

for the influence of the people with whom young people interact (e.g. family and peers) and of messages conveyed by the media (Boateng and Löwe, 2018). For instance, in Thailand, many farming parents think that their children will have more opportunities if they get a non-farming job and advise them to avoid becoming farmers (Rayasawath, 2018; Rigg et al., 2012).

The second approach analyses what young people would be willing to do if their opportunity space were to change (Leavy and Hossain, 2010, 2014). With this second approach, some studies used a different interpretation of young people's aspirations, understood as young people's hopes or dreams (Leavy and Hossain, 2010, 2014). 'Aspirations' thus refers to a future that young people consider desirable, despite being difficult to achieve (Filloux et al., 2019; Giuliani et al., 2017). Also using the second approach, other studies analysed young people's preferences if they had more opportunities. In particular, to what extent they would be willing to farm if some of the constraints to start farming were removed, and what kind of farm they would like to have. For instance, Anyidoho et al. (2012), who interviewed young people in Ghana, mentioned the changes they deemed necessary for them to consider a possible future as farmers, for example, access to credit and getting good prices for their products. Asking young people to state their preferences if they had more opportunities does not always overlap an approach based on studying young people's aspirations (in the sense of hopes and dreams). Indeed, in many rural areas, young people consider key constraints to their future to be unavoidable. For instance, in Laos, some young rural people said that they would like to farm but, when making plans for their future, they had completely internalized the idea they would be unable to access land (Senties Portilla, 2017). Consequently, they made plans for their future in which these constraints are a given.

Hardgrove et al. (2015) argued that there is sometimes a confusion between the two understandings of the concept of aspiration. In the accounts given by the young people themselves, the limit between these two understandings may not always be clear (Bossenbroek et al., 2015). The above-mentioned studies generally used one or both understandings with only limited confusion, but none asked young people to express their aspirations according to both understandings.

These two different approaches to analyse young people's willingness to farm provide a valuable conceptual base to analyse and possibly contextualize or 'debunk' the widely held view in Thailand that young people are not interested in farming. Indeed, this assessment is based on current constraints and opportunities to start farming. In other words, it does not consider possible changes in young people's opportunity space. However, this does not necessarily mean that young people would continue to shun farming if conditions improved.

The present study analyses the opinion some young rural people in Thailand have of farming, their engagement in farming and their aspirations (or absence of aspirations) to become farmers, both under prevailing conditions and if

their opportunity space changed. This article thus aims to contribute to the existing literature on young people's willingness to farm by jointly using the two above-mentioned approaches to analyse the willingness of young rural people to farm. In the specific context of Thailand, the aim of this analysis is to disentangle the extent to which the limited involvement of young people in farming is indeed due to lack of interest or rather because they cannot imagine overcoming the obstacles to starting the kind of farm they want.

Method

The study was conducted in three villages in Bang Sang District, Prachinburi Province. These villages are located in an irrigated area where farmers mostly grow rice (two crops a year) or breed fish and shrimp together in ponds. The area is still rural, and agriculture is a major source of income. There are industrial areas in the vicinity, so many villagers opt to commute daily to work in a factory.

These villages were selected because farming (which did not concern all households) involved contrasting levels of profitability from farming activities. In two villages with respectively 560 and 323 inhabitants (according to the 2017 census), rice was the main crop and accounted for respectively 83% and 96% of the agricultural area. However, the price of rice had fallen since 2015 when a national policy to support rice prices on the domestic market ended (Ricks, 2018). Hence, in these villages, rice farming on small- to medium-scale farms was generally no longer considered to be a profitable occupation.

In contrast, in the third village, which, according to the 2017 census, had 653 inhabitants, 80% of the land was dedicated to fish and shrimp breeding. Fish and shrimp breeding involved production and marketing risks, but on average, was much more profitable than growing rice. Farmers in the first two villages had not changed to fish and shrimp farming because they lacked the necessary capital and knowledge about breeding techniques and feared the previously mentioned risks.

In 2017, in the three villages, according to the village registries, 172 inhabitants were aged between 17 and 24. None of the programmes to support young farmers (Faysse et al., 2019) were implemented in any of the three villages. We interviewed a total of 86 young people in the three villages. The young people (47 female and 39 male) were first contacted via the village chiefs and subsequently via young people who had already been interviewed. The selection criteria were age (between 17 and 24 years old) and living in one of the study villages (involvement in farming was not a criterion for sampling). Among the young people interviewed, 60 were children of farmers and 12 were married. Forty-seven interviewees were students, 28 were working and 11 were unemployed.

In the two villages where the farmers focused on rice production, families of interviewees whose parents were farmers farmed an average of 6.6 ha. Based on the economic analysis by Aguilhon (2017), the average annual income of these farms was estimated to be approximately 100,000 baht¹ per year. In the third village where farmers

focused on fish and shrimp breeding, the families of interviewees whose parents were farmers farmed an average of 4.8 ha. These farms had a net average annual income of approximately 500,000 baht per year. At national level, the average net annual farm income was estimated at 148,000 baht in 2015 (Office of Agricultural Economics, 2017). The two types of farming systems we studied thus provided two contrasted levels of farm profitability on both sides of the national average. In any case, the two types of farming systems studied here were clearly not representative of the diversity of farming systems and levels of profitability in Thailand.

The approach was based on discussing young people's plans and preferences in their prevailing opportunity space and if this space would widen. First, the young people were invited to think about their current engagement and their future plans to start farming under prevailing constraints and opportunities (i.e. given their existing opportunity space, although we did not use this term with interviewees). Second, we invited the young people to describe the farm they would be willing to manage – if they had one in mind – assuming they received support to start such a farm (which corresponds to a change in their opportunity space). We did not ask them if they hoped to farm an 'ideal farm' but rather to tell us what kind of farm they would prefer if they had the opportunity. Three factors that could explain the differences in young people's vision of farming, of their future plans and of their willingness to farm if their opportunity space expanded were investigated: education level, gender and the farm structure of parents (if the latter farmed). The parents' advice was also investigated as a possible explanatory factor for the interviewees' future plans.

In the structured interviews with rural young people, we first asked the interviewees for their views on the socio-economic constraints and drawbacks of farming based on seven topics: the need for a lot of capital, difficult access to land, farming as a high-risk activity, limited profitability, lack of opportunity to increase their income in the future, hard work and low social status. The first five topics were selected based on a previous analysis of farming systems in the study area (Aguilhon, 2017). The two last topics were selected because they were regularly mentioned in other studies as topics that led young people to lose interest in farming (e.g. Ascitti et al., 2016; Sumberg et al., 2017; Tadele and Gella, 2012). The interviewees were invited to rank each topic as: (1) this is not an issue for me; (2) this is an issue for people in my village, but does not affect me personally; (3) this represents a slight disadvantage in my case; (4) this is a major constraint for me; and (5) this is an insurmountable obstacle and explains why I am not interested in farming. The interviewees were also asked to state the main problems the farmers in their villages had to face in their everyday work.

Second, we asked the interviewees whether they planned to farm (either part time or full time) in the next 10 years, and for their parents' opinion about them becoming farmers. When young people were asked about their current engagement in farming and their future plans, they could choose between three forms of engagement: as a farm

labourer, working with their parents and working as an independent farmer.

Third, we asked the interviewees to state their willingness to start as an independent farmer (possibly on family land) if their opportunity space evolved. They were asked to describe the kind of farm they would be willing to manage (if they had one in mind), and we explicitly asked them to ignore the difficulties they would face in setting up such a farm. They were asked if they would be interested in running such a farm (part time or full time) in the next 10 years if they received government support. If they said yes, they were asked to describe the kind of support they would need. We also asked the interviewees whether they would be ready to become a full-time farmer on the farm they had described or whether they would prefer to work in a factory, if both options were available to them. Working in a factory was an option available to all the young people we interviewed in the three villages. The possibility of earning an income in industry and the associated lifestyle represented a benchmark against which the young people could measure their willingness to farm.

Finally, the analysis of the gendered differences in the answers of the 86 young people was complemented by interviews of the chiefs of the three villages and four of previously interviewed young people. Interviewees were invited to assess differences and similarities in the above-mentioned issues according to gender in their villages. The interviews took place between June 2018 and May 2019.

Results

Constraints to farming

Figure 1 shows the respondents' views on the importance of the seven pre-identified constraints and drawbacks to farming. They emphasized that the social status of farmers was not an issue for them. Rather, they underlined economic issues, that is, the high risks involved in farming, low profitability, the need for capital and the difficulty of accessing land. They provided details about the risks by describing the problems faced by the farmers in their villages in their everyday life. These were mainly pests and diseases, fluctuating prices for agricultural products, drought and floods. In terms of land access, among the 60 interviewees whose family farmed, 52% of farmed land was owned, 46% was rented and 2% was provided cost free by relatives. Rental contracts were generally signed for 1 or 2 years for rice farming and for 5 years for fish and shrimp farming. Interviewees emphasized the high-rental costs of rice farming and that landowners refused to sign long-term rental contracts with rice farmers.

There was no statistically significant difference in terms of level of education and gender in the interviewees' assessments of the constraints and drawbacks to farming. The farming systems of the respondents whose parents were farmers influenced their answers concerning the lack of opportunity to increase farm income in the future. None of the respondents whose parents bred fish and shrimp on more than 4.8 ha considered this constraint would prevent

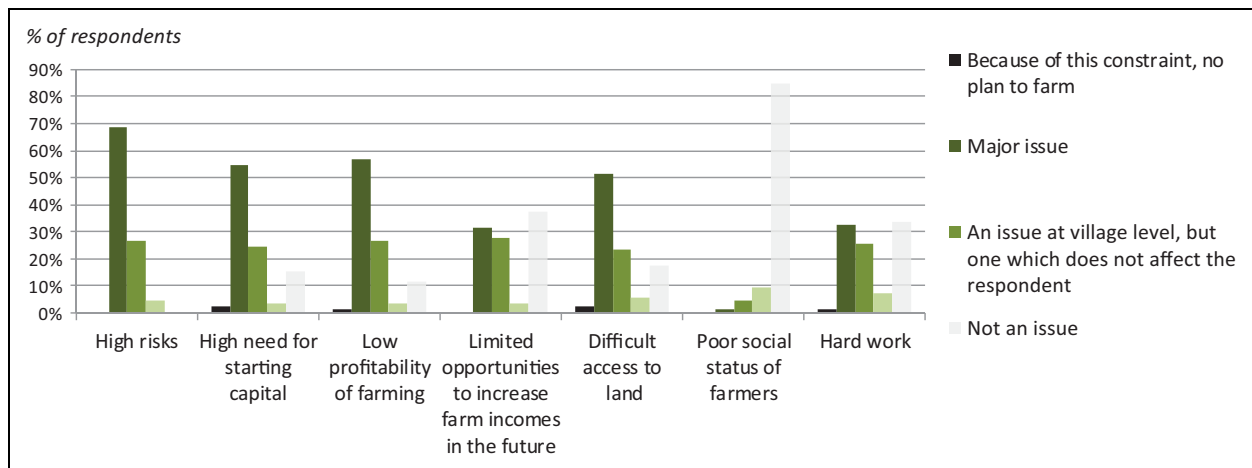


Figure 1. Young people's views of the constraints and drawbacks to farming.

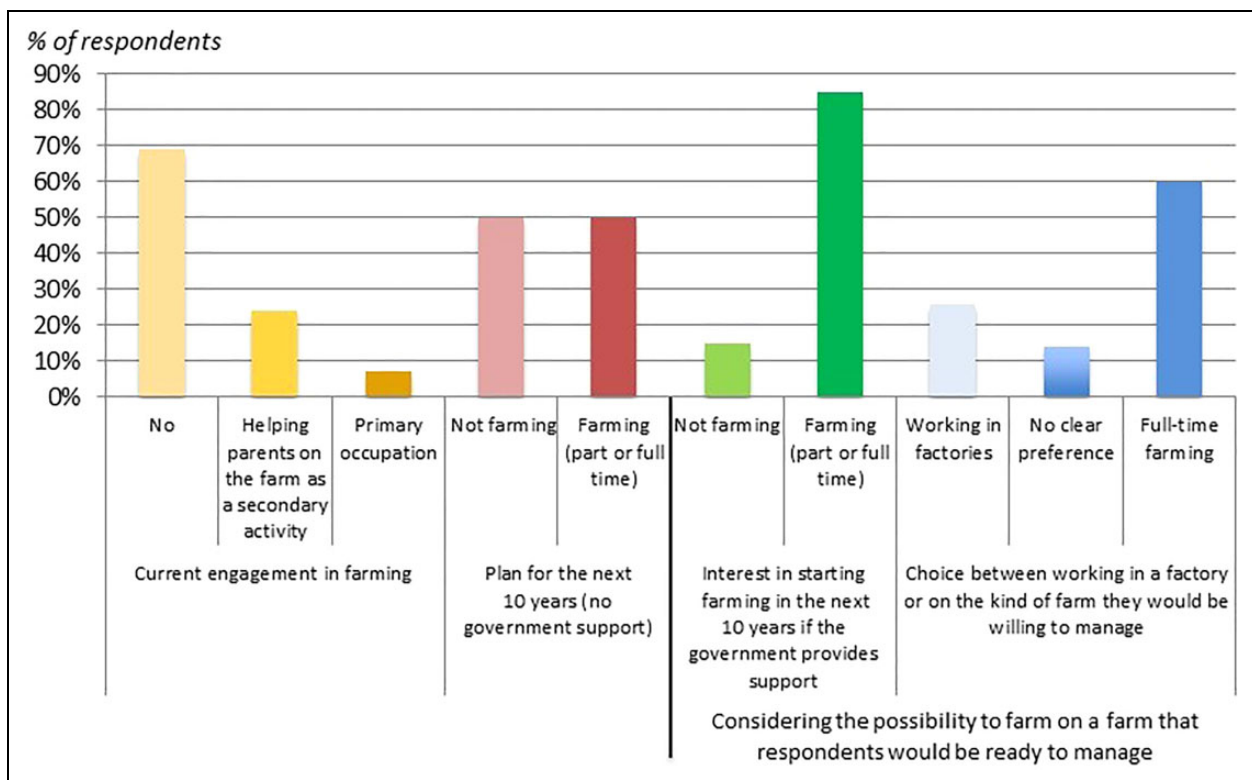


Figure 2. Young people's involvement in farming at the time of the interview, their future plans and their interest in farming a farm in the way they preferred.

them farming, whereas one-third of the other respondents whose parents were farmers (i.e. those that did not farm fish and shrimp or did so on less than 4.8 ha) said this constraint would prevent them from farming. Differences related to the characteristics of parents' farms were found to be much weaker or non-existent relative to the other constraints and drawbacks.

Plans for the future

The majority of young people we interviewed were not involved in farming when the interview took place (Figure 2). However, half the respondents planned to

become farmers in the next 10 years (Figure 2). Family situations greatly influenced these plans. Apart from two young people, all those who planned to become farmers in the next 10 years were children of farmers and two-thirds aimed to start farming on their parents' farm (either working with their parents or starting on their own on part of the family land). The others planned to start on their own, mainly because they considered their parents' production was not profitable and their parents did not want to let them try other agricultural products. Eighteen of the 43 young people who planned to do so part time, either because they saw farming as a complementary activity or because they were not sure they could make a living from farming.

Among the interviewees, 21 had a bachelor's degree, 30 had a vocational certificate, 32 had a secondary school level and 3 had only completed primary school. Some interviewees mentioned their educational ambitions and their corresponding lack of interest in being a farmer. For instance, one respondent told us: 'I plan to be a lawyer. If that does not work, I would like to join the police. Becoming a farmer is the last option I would go for'. However, quantitative differences were not marked, as 8 of the 21 interviewees who had a bachelor's degree still planned to become farmers.

Similarly, no quantitative difference between young people's plans appeared according to gender. However, during interviews specifically focused on gender, interviewees mentioned that men often became farmers younger than women. Many women started farming after marrying a farmer or as a way to earn a supplementary income. Young men worked more on their parents' land and had more farming experience when they themselves became farmers. Moreover, while young men were ready to do any of the tasks required by farming, the young women wanted to avoid the hard jobs and being out in the sun. Finally, there was no difference in accessing land, but parents expected more from their sons than from their daughters in terms of taking over the family farm in the future.²

Quantitative differences between young people's plans were more significant according to the profitability of the family farm and to parents' advice. Among the 20 children of fish and shrimp farmers, 17 planned to farm in the next 10 years. For instance, one young man already farmed full time and bred fish and shrimp with his parents. He told us: 'I am looking forward to inheriting my family's land and managing my own farm. I plan to rent more land and invest in the farm to increase my income. I don't want to make any changes on the farm other than making it bigger'. By contrast, among the 45 young people whose parents grew rice, only 19 planned to farm in the future. One young man explained: 'Currently I'm a part-time farmer, and at night I work in a factory with my father. We don't earn enough money growing rice because the price for rice went down. I plan to spend more time farming in the next ten years, but I will diversify'.

Out of the 31 interviewees whose parents advised them not to become farmers, 18 heeded the advice and did not plan to become farmers. One young woman told us: 'I would like to find work in my field of study [Business Management] but I'm not sure how to go about it. I don't plan to farm since I have no capital to invest. My parents want me to work in a factory to earn more'. Another young woman said: 'My parents don't want me to be a farmer because it is very unstable. It's a high-risk activity because of weather changes and because it is vulnerable to natural disasters. This can lead to big losses. My parents want me to work as a government official. A government official has a stable income and gets social benefits'. By contrast, 15 of the 17 interviewees whose parents supported them in becoming farmers planned to do so (some parents gave their children no particular advice about becoming a farmer). Parents' advice was highly correlated with their

farming system: 15 of the 17 who advised their children to farm bred fish and shrimp, whereas 25 of the 31 who advised them not to be farmers grew rice or did not farm.

Considering changes in opportunity spaces

In comparison with young people's plans if no support were available, many more interviewees said they would be interested in farming (part time or full time) in the next 10 years if they received government support (73 against 43, Figure 2). The farms they described were fish and shrimp farms or rice farms (two-thirds), the same but with diversification (one-sixth), and diversified farms producing fruit and vegetables (one-sixth). Many children from farming families mentioned they would be willing to use the parents' farm as a basis but would make changes. Fourteen of the 60 children of farmers were willing to diversify the products of the family farm and 17 were willing to enlarge the family farm.

To be able to set up these farms, the interviewees said they mainly needed help with capital investment (82% of the respondents interested in starting farming mentioned this need), knowledge of farming practices and marketing (71%), access to land (64%) and access to markets under good conditions (45%). The interviewees considered access to land and capital to be key constraints to starting farming but to be successful, they would also need knowledge about farming. Most of the children of rice farmers did not want to grow rice like their parents, because it was not profitable, so they needed to learn how to grow other products. However, none of the respondents had chosen agriculture as a major during their studies. Gender and education level would not influence young people's plans if their opportunity space expanded. Thirteen of the interviewees (15%) said they would not be interested in farming even if support were provided by the government. As one young woman told us: 'My parents are farmers but I'm going to university next year. I really love my subject [chemistry], so I don't want to be a farmer in any case'.

Among the 86 respondents, 51 described the farm they would be willing to run and said they would prefer to work full time on the farm they described even if they had the opportunity to work in a factory. They considered that farming provided a better quality of life and better working conditions. In their view, farming made it possible to be independent, to have free time and to be at home with their family. The 35 young people who said that they preferred to work in a factory than on a farm (even one that, in theory, they would be willing to manage) argued that they could earn more working in a factory and there were fewer risks involved. One interviewee described this alternative as follows: 'When you work in agriculture, you are more independent than when you work in a factory. You have free time to relax, and more opportunity to increase your income by investing in the farm, for example by diversifying crops or getting more land. But it is such hard work. Working in a factory provides a stable income and there is no need for investment, that's why so many young people now work in factories. On the other hand, you're not independent, you

have to work long hours and you only get one day off a week, and sometimes you even have to work at night’.

Discussion

Disentangling the two understandings of young people’s aspirations

Disentangling the two understandings of young people’s aspirations was a useful approach to interpret students’ viewpoints and plans. This was particularly the case concerning access to farming knowledge, for which students’ declarations may at first seem paradoxical. None of the interviewees chose to study agriculture, even though they considered it challenging to acquire the knowledge of the farming practices they would need to set up the kind of farm they would be willing to run. Indeed, young people preferred to study other subjects, because, considering their opportunity space as a given, they could not imagine being able to access sufficient land and capital (without which acquiring knowledge of farming would be irrelevant). Moreover, studying other subjects would open up more opportunities for employment in the future and thus help them extend their opportunity space. However, it also contributes to the ‘deskilling’ (White, 2012), that is, reducing the farming know-how of younger generations in rural areas.

Clarifying the differences between the two understandings of young people’s aspirations thus helps analyse if and to what extent young people want to start farming and the constraints they face. In that sense, it can be a useful step on the way to designing support to help young people start farming. However, young people’s aspirations (understood as hopes and dreams) were influenced by the farms with which they were familiar, which may not cover all possible farming systems. The farms that the young rural people in our study described as those they would be willing to manage only partially overlapped the range of farms managed by young farmers in Thailand. Our respondents mainly mentioned three of the five types of farms managed by young farmers identified by Phiboon et al. (2019): those that mainly produce one crop, those who do the same but attempt to diversify and those who aim to use an entrepreneurial approach. Only two mentioned the fourth type (organic farming) and none mentioned the fifth (being both a farmer and a leader involved in rural development). A key reason was the lack of examples to inspire them, as there were very few organic farms and no rural development associations in the vicinity of the three villages surveyed in the present study.

Being able to make a living from farming

Some of the interviewees said they would be willing to change their future plans and become a farmer if their opportunity space changed. This change would be possible because young people judged the obstacles to starting to farm to be access to resources (which could be solved if support were available) and not the social status of farmers. This result is in agreement with the results obtained by Man

(2012) in Malaysia, who showed that young people did not have a negative perception of being a farmer per se. These two studies contrast with studies in Africa (Chinsinga and Chasukwa, 2018, Sumberg et al., 2017), which showed that the low status of farmers was a key deterrent for young people to start farming. Consequently, support provided to help young people access the resources they need to start farming could effectively influence their engagement as farmers in our study area in Thailand.

For those whose parents farmed, the profitability of the parents’ farms was a key factor that influenced not only their vision of being a farmer but also their aspirations (according to both understandings). The profitability of their parents’ farms explained to a large extent the parents’ advice to their children about becoming a farmer and appeared to have much more influence on young people’s views and plans than gender or education level. This finding concerning the importance of the profitability of parents’ farms is in agreement with those in studies of young farmers around the world which found that the prospect of being able to make a profit is a key factor in young people’s engagement in farming (Nag et al., 2018). There is no shortage of young people farming in some regions of Ethiopia where farming is profitable (Sakketa, 2018), and in some countries in the European Union where young people can take over large farms (Zagata and Sutherland, 2015). By contrast, young people’s involvement in agriculture is limited: (i) in resource-poor areas of Ethiopia (Bezu and Holden, 2014) and of Uganda (Kristensen and Birch-Thomsen, 2013); (ii) in Japan, where young people often take over farms of less than 2 ha (Uchiyama, 2014); and (iii) in areas in the European Union where farm profitability is low (Redigor, 2012).

Interviewees who would prefer to be a farmer than to work in a factory put more emphasis on the quality of life associated with farming than on the income they could derive from it. However, being able to make a living from farming played a key role in shaping young people’s opinions and plans, especially given family resources. This could be a more central topic in programmes that support young farmers in Thailand, which until now, have paid limited attention to this issue (Faysse et al., 2019).

Conclusion

A minority of the young people interviewed were involved in farming when the interview took place. However, our analysis calls into question the explanation usually given for the lack of engagement, that is, young people’s lack of interest in farming. Approximately, one-third of the young people we interviewed said they were ready to change their plans and consider farming in the future if it were possible under conditions they considered satisfactory. The study shows the interest of simultaneously investigating young people’s plans in the prevailing conditions, and their hopes and their preferences should conditions change when conducting studies of young people’s willingness to farm.

This study also shows that, to encourage more young people to become farmers in newly industrialized countries

in Asia, public policies should not only accompany young people who already plan to farm but also target those who would be willing to do so if their opportunity space expanded. Inasmuch as young people's moving away from farming should not be taken as a given, neither should their stated hopes be considered as a given. No support was available to young people to start farming in the villages surveyed here, so these young people seldom thought about the kind of farms they would be willing to farm if such support were available. Therefore, support could not only help them getting the resources they would need to start farming but also, beforehand, help them clarify the kind of farm they would be ready to farm, for example, by helping them visit various types of farms, helping them build business plans and assessing what kind of resources they already have or could obtain in the short term to start the farm they would be ready and willing to run.

Acknowledgements

We thank the village heads and their assistants in the three villages where the research took place in Bang Sang District, Prachinburi Province. We thank as well the staff of the Agricultural Extension Department in Ban Sang District. The text benefitted from suggestions from Jim Sumberg.




Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (French National Agency for Research) as part of the DOUBT project.

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Notes

1. In February 2019, 1 USD = 31.3 Thai baht.
2. This difference between genders was not expressed as a strong social norm and is not representative of the wide diversity of situations in Thailand concerning postnuptial residences and the distribution of farmland during inheritance processes (Kwanmuang, 2015; Rittirong et al., 2014).

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