

The Next Generation of Farmers in Laos



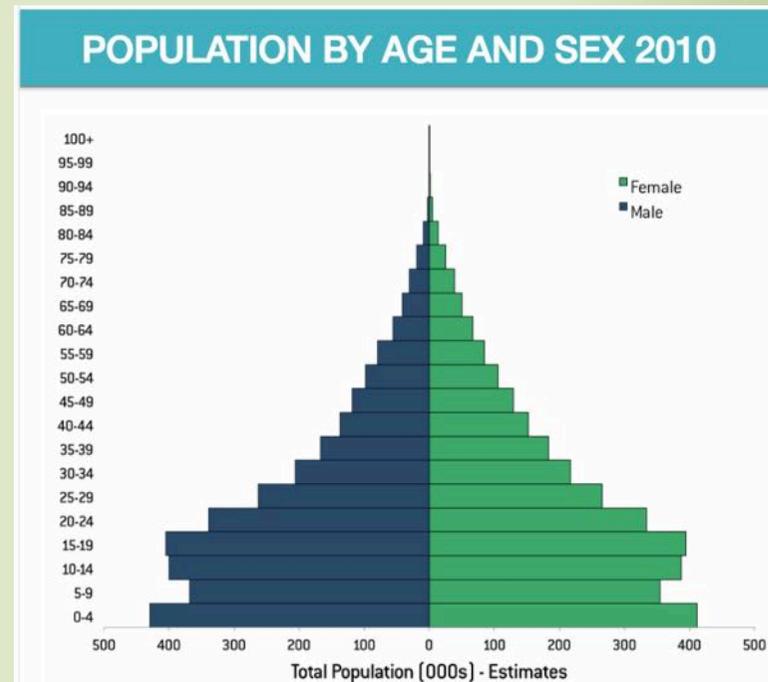
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Demographic Context

- ⦿ Approx. 70% of the Lao households are engaged in farming
- ⦿ Approx. 60% of the population are under the age of 25.
- ⦿ This means that rural youth make up about 45% of the total population!
- ⦿ What is the future for this important section of society?
- ⦿ And what advisory services do they need?



Agrarian Transition

Life in rural Laos is changing rapidly

- ⦿ The ongoing shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture is accompanied by increased *connectivity* (eg. roads and phones), which brings opportunities and problems
- ⦿ Compared to their parents, rural youth are better informed, increasingly mobile, and have access to a wider range of products
- ⦿ They are also more exposed to the threat of trafficking, drugs, debt...and more likely to leave the village.
- ⦿ Data on out-migration from rural areas is lacking, but we know hundreds of thousands of young people are moving to cities in Laos and going to work in Thailand



Aspirations of rural parents

- ◉ In 2015, the LURAS carried out focus group discussions in 8 villages. In *all* villages, parents said they did **not** want their children to continue in farming.
- ◉ Child labour is widespread in rural areas, but the education of children *is* a priority, contrary to the findings of earlier studies.
- ◉ The value of education, as stated by parents, is to ensure that children get a job (preferably with Government) and send money back home.
- ◉ Villagers repeatedly stated that farming was hard and dirty work, with uncertain returns. They see themselves as having low social status and few opportunities for advancement.
- ◉ The lack of self-esteem among villages, or a positive vision for the future of farming, should be a great concern to everybody involved in rural advisory services



Aspirations of rural youth

- ⦿ A study in 2015 of students at Agricultural College showed that most of them want to work for the Government, rather than returning to their village. Education is a means for escaping farming, not becoming a better farmer!
- ⦿ Employment in Govt is only possible for a minority, but this is not the only escape route for rural youth. Other studies in Laos show that the aspiration for a 'better life' leads to paid employment rather than unpaid labour on the family farm.
- ⦿ The search for a cash income may involve migration to urban areas (eg. construction, textiles) but equally important is paid labour in the agric sector (eg. plantations, processing).
- ⦿ In many rural households, one child will stay with the parents while others leave. This is often a child with less formal education
- ⦿ Although those who leave the village may not want to return, the family farm does provide a safety net in times of crisis, or if paid labour is seasonal.



Scenarios for the next generation

Grey Villages

Out-migration by young people results in an ageing rural population, with no innovation and low productivity

Youth become urban workers and consumers

Brown Villages

Investment in industrial scale agribusiness provide cash incomes in rural areas, and people stay in villages

Youth become labour force for the global food industry

Green Villages

Farmer groups and SMEs engaged in 'green' production and processing provide attractive new livelihoods

Youth become pioneers for rural community development

Which scenario is most likely to happen?

Youth empowerment

- ⦿ A dilemma for rural advisory services: *should we be helping young people become better farmers, or should we be helping them make the transition out of farming?*



- ⦿ The answer is that we should be helping rural youth acquire knowledge and skills that allows them to make better choices for themselves...
- ⦿ ... choices that are safe and decent, productive and rewarding, wherever they decide to go.
- ⦿ Rural advisory services can't tell young people what to do, but we can help to expand their options, and provide support if they decide to follow certain paths

Supporting those who stay

- ⦿ Activities for rural youth that have been planned / implemented by LURAS and previous Helvetas projects include:
 - ⦿ Eco-schools activities for secondary students
 - ⦿ Community learning centres managed by rural youth
 - ⦿ Young Agripreneur Scheme for students at Agric College:
 - Business skills training / competition
 - Small grants to start-up rural micro-enterprises
- ⦿ ***But extension meetings and messages continue to be dominated by the interests of older farmers!***



Supporting those who leave

- ⦿ SDC and other donors are funding vocational training programmes in Laos, and this helps some young people get better jobs outside of agriculture
- ⦿ Other projects in the health, education and social welfare sectors may also benefit young people, but there is no integrated strategy for supporting young people in the ongoing social transition (ref: Adolescent and Youth Situation Analysis, UNFPA, 2014)
- ⦿ The Lao Youth Union is a 'mass organisation' under the umbrella of the Party, that officially represents young people
- ⦿ Independent youth networks also exist in larger cities, but members come from the urban elite, not rural migrants



Final thoughts

Why is farming unattractive to young people?

- ⊙ Some observers think the sector has an image problem, and that we need to make farming more 'sexy'
 - *If this is the case, maybe we need to identify new role models and success cases, and develop advocacy strategies that make farming more appealing*
- ⊙ But perhaps the problem is more practical. Young people want to escape drudgery, earn cash and get access to the products of a modern life
 - *In which case, we need to pay more attention to rural job creation and enterprise development*
- ⊙ Or perhaps the problem is more psychological. Young people want independence, self-respect and a chance to do something different
 - *In which case, maybe we need more initiatives that are planned and managed by rural youth themselves*





Thank You

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