

Agrarian transformation and areal differentiation in Northern Thailand ^{1/}

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Abstract

Since Thailand has implemented its first Five-year National Economic and Social Development Plan in 1961, a series of continuous agrarian transformation and its consequences on social and economic of food production has been recognized. The country is endowed with good natural resources. Its economies are traditionally agricultural-based. In response to open market economy, Thailand has followed modernization and development paradigm by investing in infrastructure construction to facilitate the production and distribution of primary products.

This paper examines the sequence and consequences of agricultural changes and their driving forces in three main eco-physiography of northern Thailand.

The highland ecosystem exemplifies the transformation of subsistence agriculture into niche-specific, commercial agriculture. The push for replacing opium cultivation since 1970s by the Royal Project through market oriented-development approach is able to integrate agricultural production, processing and marketing under a single management. . The Royal Project Foundation, as it is presently known, is able to coordinate government line agencies, universities and corporates to engage in a collaborative effort to carry out research for development, to execute action plan, and to organize group farming and design marketing strategies so that the highland farmers in 36 village sites across five provinces receive fair benefits. The spillover effects of commercial farming systems across non –project sites have caused increasing concerns over the mismanagement of farming practices. The varying success among ethnic groups, both within and outside the Project sites, has created wealth differentiation. There is an increasing role of local entrepreneur, both of Thai and non-Thai ethnic origins, in arranging marketing and production of new crops in the settlement areas. The livelihood assets such as land ownership and local rights of managing forest and land resources are important agenda to be settled for achieving sustainable livelihoods of the highland ethnic communities. The institutional concerns are related to the scaling-up of the Royal Project Foundation's experiences, and the workable organization structures that would oversee and implement the programs effectively and efficiently.

The expansion of road construction and the high demand of food crops during the early period of the National Economic and Social Development Plans has provided economic incentives for opening up of the rainfed uplands in the Lower North for farming of cash crops, such as corn, sugarcane, soybean, cassava, etc. The expansion of feed meal industry

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has intensified the utilization of undulating, rainfed uplands and hillslopes. The widespread use of hybrid corn has made the production system more dependent on chemical fertilizers. The decline in soil fertility has prompted the private seed companies to expand their cash cropping frontiers to the uplands of the Upper North. . Farmers in the more favorable growing environments are producing crops for seed instead of for grain. The production systems of these annual cash crops are able to maintain through the credit supports of the local traders who have well marketing network with the input supply chains. The seemingly patron-client relationship between the farmers and local traders continues to be a major driving force in the development of upland farming of annual crops. The successful establishment of citrus plantations in the northern districts of Chiang Mai province by the private corporate with subsequent adaptation of local farmers has introduced quality control and product branding for adding more value to agricultural produce. The MOAC also launches several supporting schemes of fruit crops-based land use systems for the upland farmers to diversify and stabilize incomes by designing “Good Agricultural Practice” or GAP, for several fruit crops to provide efficient production of quality products. The growing concerns about social, economic and environmental sustainability of the upland farming are related to the heavy use of pesticides in fruit crops, the degrading soil fertility and the debt incidence of farmers in the annual crop growing areas.

The rice based farming systems in the lowland ecosystem receives full benefits of the Green Revolution technology particularly the irrigated rice farming in the Lower North. Continuous commercial rice production is made possible through the availabilities of irrigation system, high yielding modern rice varieties, combined harvester and the adaptation of broadcasting technique. . Farmers in the Upper North are subsistence rice farmers, but practicing multiple cropping in the irrigated areas. Farmers in the rainfed lowland, having larger farm size, select high quality non-glutinous rice varieties and plant them as cash crop with glutinous rice varieties as subsistence crop. The concerns over sustainability of rice farming has prompted the MOAC to promote land use alternatives to improve farm income and to reduce rice-growing areas. The traditional rice land has transformed into fruit orchards or pond agriculture integrating rice, vegetable crops, fruit trees, fish aquaculture, poultry, and pig with various combination and arrangement. The economic boom during the mid-80s to mid-90s has witnessed the changing land ownership as land speculation was at its highest peak. Urbanization has expanded and the rural areas also become urbanized as more modern housing complexes have penetrated. The peri-urban agriculture is seen as an alternative for small family farms to produce safe food products for urbanites through the production of pesticide-free agricultural products.

Under the pressure of globalization and free trade agreement, agricultural production strategies and structural adjustment will be needed at various levels to ensure sustainable livelihoods for small farmers.