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“Competition for Resources in a Changing World:
New Drive for Rural Development”

Participatory Action Research on Marketing Fresh Litchi with Ethnic Minority Farmers in the Thai Highlands

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Abstract

Smallholders of Hmong ethnic minority are growing litchi in mountainous areas in the north of Thailand. As a marginalised group, their bargaining power and market access are limited, being forced to accept the farm-gate price offered by exploitative middlemen. In recent years, growers have got low prices for their fresh litchi fruits to the point that some have cut down their orchards to plant other cash crops instead, such as vegetables. Yet, it is recognised that on sloping lands, fruit orchards are beneficial in minimising soil erosion. Concerns over sustainable land use and rural development have prompted a group of academics from Hohenheim University, Germany, and Chiang Mai University, Thailand, to collaborate and invite farmers to initiate talks with a large supermarket chain that aims to buy directly from growers, thus bypassing the middlemen and guaranteeing higher prices.

The prospect of higher financial benefits has incited 25 farmers to comply with Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) guidelines and to reduce the use of hazardous agrochemicals. They have organised themselves as a litchi grower group and expressed readiness to adapt their cultivation methods to the buyer standards. Drawing on qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews and participant observation of negotiations between academics, farmers and company representatives, our research provides a basis for deriving a coherent framework to sequence innovation adoption in a joint marketing venture. The paper presents the decision-making processes between relevant actors, assesses their influences and identifies key determinants in developing market plans between a large business partner and a small marginalised farmers' group.

Keywords: Innovation processes, market development, participatory action research, qualitative research