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A systematic analysis of factors shaping youth participation in agriculture in northern Laos

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Abstract

The Lao People's Democratic Republic has one of the youngest populations in Asia, positioning youth as a potential driver of social and economic development. While agriculture remains the main source of employment, many young Lao are moving away from the sector, driven by unstable economic conditions, limited income, and migration opportunities. This study uses institutional theory and a market systems approach to analyse how structural barriers, support systems, and social norms shape rural youth participation in agriculture. Drawing on the AGREE project implemented by HELVETAS in four northern provinces, it applies a mixed-method design, combining surveys (n=130), focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, logit regression, and thematic coding. Findings show that most rural youth remain engaged in agriculture but depend on non-farm work to offset low farm incomes. While agriculture is seen as socially acceptable and meaningful, it is not widely perceived as profitable. Limited capital, poor infrastructure, and weak institutional support constrain youth aspirations and access to opportunities. Informal networks partially fill these gaps but lack the capacity to drive systemic change in terms of behaviours, structures, as well as norms toward agriculture. The results highlight the need to strengthen rural institutions, improve support services, and embed climate resilience within the agricultural systems to make farming a viable livelihood pathway for rural youth.

Keywords: Agriculture, institutional theory, Laos, market system approach, rural youth, systems thinking