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The engagement of young people in irrigated agriculture in North Africa and Thailand: Diverse pathways which occasionally meet public policies

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Young people's lack of engagement in agriculture is of increasing concern in many emerging economies. A series of studies investigated this engagement in irrigated areas in North Africa and Thailand. The research analysed young people's aspirations, the constraints they face in accessing the resources they need to formalize their engagement, the strategies they implement to overcome these constraints, and to what extent they receive support from public programmes.

Many young people in North Africa and Thailand would like to get involved in agriculture and create their own pathways based on their aspirations and the resources available to them. However, the constraints they face limit their capacity to acquire the farms they would like to have, i.e. more innovative and more profitable than the farms managed by the previous generation. Their engagement in agriculture often takes place in informal settings. The majority of young people who overcome these constraints do so without or with limited public support.

More effective support for the engagement of a new generation in agriculture will not only require increased investment, but will also need to better account for the diversity of profiles and aspirations of the younger generation. This will be facilitated by increased participation of young people in the design of support programmes.

The lack of engagement of young people in agriculture is of increasing concern in many emerging economies. In these countries – and to varying extents – rural youth can choose between engaging in non-agricultural activities (in rural or urban areas) or in agriculture. This is not necessarily a binary choice as many young people have more than one activity. They can engage in agriculture in different ways: working on the family farm, working as a farm labourer, being employed by or creating a company providing agricultural services or in the agroindustry, or having their own farm.

In the last decade, public policies to support the engagement of young people in agriculture have been set up in Southeast Asia (FFTC-RDA, 2014) and in Latin America (Barcellos, 2017; Vargas Winstanley, 2018). In Morocco, one of the main objectives of the national agricultural strategy launched in 2020 is to support the engagement of young people in agriculture.

However, studies on the engagement of young people in agriculture in emerging countries are rare. A series of studies was conducted in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Thailand on how young people find a place in the agricultural sector and more generally in rural areas: their

aspirations, the constraints they face when attempting to engage in agriculture, the way they access productive resources, and their relations with support programmes. These studies are published in special issues of *Cahiers Agricultures* and *Alternatives Rurales* in 2015 and of *Outlook on Agriculture* in 2019.

The research mainly took place in irrigated areas of Thailand and North Africa¹, where examples can be found of life trajectories of people engaged in agriculture that young people can consider as acceptable or even attractive. However, it should be noted that these areas are not representative of the diversity of agricultural situations in the four countries concerned. In each country, there are also regions where opportunities to make a living from agriculture are limited and where young people who remain in rural areas, generally focus on non-agricultural activities (e.g., tourism).

The stakes related to the engagement of young people in agriculture are specific in Thailand and in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Thailand is a striking example of newly industrialised Asian countries where rural youth have relatively easy access to non-agricultural jobs

¹ Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

(IFAD, 2019, p. 175). The reduced engagement of Thai young people in agriculture is highly significant at national level, although there are major differences between agricultural value chains (Faysse, 2019; Faysse et al., 2020).

The reduced engagement of young people in agriculture stems not only from the availability of non-agricultural jobs, but also from the limited profitability of many small-scale farms. The rapid ageing of the farming population in some regions could threaten the functioning of major components of Thai agriculture in the future (Rigg et al., 2018). The 2017-2036 agricultural development strategy envisages the engagement of young people in agriculture as playing a major role in sustaining agricultural production but also in maintaining economic and social life in rural areas (Faysse et al., 2019).

In North Africa, the availability of employment in the agricultural sector for rural young people has long been considered as a way to limit the rural exodus, but opportunities for non-agricultural employment (in both rural and urban areas) have been and still are more limited than in Thailand. Public debates are beginning to mention young people's lack of engagement in agriculture as a problem for the agricultural sector per se (Kechiche, 2019). However, these debates are not based on a documented evaluation of ongoing changes in the engagement of young people in agriculture. Undertaking a reliable evaluation is difficult given the lack of regular surveys of changes in the number and structure of farms. Such an evaluation would also need to account for the fact that many young people are involved in agriculture part time, especially in family farms.

Investigating the aspirations and trajectories of young people in North Africa and Thailand

The above-mentioned studies in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Thailand were

undertaken along four main axes. The first focused on **young people's aspirations**, in particular their life projects given their prevailing situations (Bossenbroek et al., 2015). It also considered young people's interest in engaging in agriculture if the conditions were better than existing conditions and if they received support (Filloux et al., 2019; Ruiz Salvago et al., 2019).

The second axis focused on **the diversity of the economic and social engagement of young people in rural areas and the strategies that young people design to obtain the resources they require to engage in agriculture** (Amichi et al., 2015b; Ftouhi et al., 2015b; Hamamouche et al., 2015; Naouri et al., 2015).

The third axis analysed **how and to what extent young people interact with public organisations involved in rural and agricultural development** (Abdellaoui et al., 2015; Bouzidi et al., 2015a). This included analysing the long-term effects of public programmes to support young people's engagement in farming (Gharbi et al., 2018) and analysing the viewpoints of rural youth and other actors on appropriate public policies to better support the agricultural plans of young people (Faysse et al., 2019).

The fourth axis considered **the engagement of young people in the governance of rural territories**, especially their involvement in local authorities, NGOs and collective organisations focused on agricultural production or rural development (Ftouhi et al., 2016; Ftouhi et al., 2020; Kadiri et al., 2015a).

The studies involved surveys (typically of between 30 and 180 people) and in-depth interviews with young people and other actors (e.g., staff of rural development organisations). These studies accounted for the fact that the terms "youth" and "engagement in agriculture" cover complex realities. The 'youth' category is always socially defined at local level. Moreover, many young people are mobile because none of the activities available to them enable them to

earn a sufficient permanent income, or because young people want to limit the risks related to each individual activity. Because young people frequently move between rural and urban areas and because of their multiple activities, young people's engagement in agriculture can take multiple forms (Ftouhi et al., 2015b).

Engaging in agriculture as a 'life project'

Studies in Thailand and in North Africa showed that **many young people do not reject agriculture per se and hope to build a life project based on agriculture** (Ftouhi et al., 2015b; Ruiz-Salvago et al., 2019). This assessment is in agreement with other assessments made in other regions of the world where farming can be profitable, e.g. in Ethiopia (Sakketa, 2018) and in Europe (Zagata and Sutherland, 2015).

In Thailand, there is no major difference between young women and young men in their aspirations to engage in agriculture and in the constraints they face (Phiboon et al., 2019; Ruiz-Salvago et al., 2019). In North Africa, it is difficult for young women to gain autonomy by engaging in family farms because access to land and social recognition favour young men. Consequently, if they can, young rural women look for employment outside the family farm (Bossenbroek et al., 2015; Ftouhi et al., 2015b). Many young women have become farm workers in the last 20 years, resulting in improved but still limited economic and social autonomy (Bossenbroek, 2019; Bossenbroek and Ait Mous, 2016; Bouzidi et al., 2011).

Many young rural people are willing to start their own farm in the short or longer term. Their motives vary: to achieve economic autonomy and social recognition (Bouzidi et al., 2015a; Quarouch et al., 2015), but also to be involved in sustainable farming (Phiboon et al., 2019).

The young people interviewed in North Africa and Thailand generally hope to have innovative farms based on an entrepreneurial attitude to farming practices and the choice of crops, and the farms they wish to start are usually knowledge and capital intensive. Children of farmers often mentioned they would be willing to manage their own farms differently from their parents (Amichi et al., 2015a; Faysse et al., 2015; Filloux et al., 2019; Ruiz-Salvago et al., 2019).

Young people cited obtaining sufficient income from farming as a motive to engage in agriculture, but also being capable of managing risks. These risks are related to farming per se, but also to young people's health. Thus, young people engaging in farming would like to benefit from adequate health care systems (Faysse et al., 2019). They consider irrigated farming to be a good way to produce high-value products and deal with climate risks.

Strategies to address existing constraints

Young people in North Africa and Thailand face many difficulties when they want to engage in agriculture, in particular accessing land, capital, and knowledge of the farming practices they need for their farm projects, and accessing support programmes (Bouzidi et al., 2015a; Phiboon et al., 2019). They design strategies to address these constraints on a case-by-case basis, depending on the resources available to them directly and through their social networks (Bouzidi et al., 2015a).

Young people who want to have their own farm have little opportunity to obtain long-term formalised access to land. The main way for them to access land is to sign short-term rental contracts, although this limits their capacity to invest in innovative and capital intensive farms (Amichi et al., 2015b). Some young people build partnerships with farm owners. Others prefer to engage in activities in the agricultural sector that do not require land

(e.g., beekeeping, marketing of agricultural products, Bouzidi et al., 2015b).

Young people in North Africa not only face material constraints but also sometimes find it difficult to become autonomous from the older generation. This concerns their role in the decision making in family farms but also their relationships with local notables who sometimes control the governance of rural territories (Bossenbroek et al., 2015; Kadiri et al., 2015b). In Thailand, young graduates who want to engage in farming face questions from their parents and members of their communities, who do not understand why a graduate would choose farming as a life project (Phiboon et al., 2019).

Finally, some young people also engage in community activities – sometimes as leaders – alongside their involvement in agriculture (Aroussi Bachari et al., 2015; Kadiri et al., 2015a and b; Phiboon et al., 2019). Their involvement in the associative sector and in political arenas leads to better recognition by public administrations and in local communities.

Young people's pathways to engage in farming can be long and precarious. In Thailand, agricultural students often make long-term plans to access the resources they need (e.g., they learn farming practices by working on other farms, gathering capital, Filloux et al., 2019). Moreover, the strategies applied by young people to overcome the constraints to engaging in agriculture are not always successful (Bouzidi et al., 2015b; Gharbi et al., 2018) and many of these constraints seem to young people to be too difficult to overcome to even consider engaging in agriculture (Amichi et al., 2015a; Ruiz-Salvago et al., 2019).

Occasional encounters with public policies

In North Africa, some young people have benefited from substantial support in developing individual or collective agricultural projects. However, the support provided was

limited in time or in the number of beneficiaries (Abdellaoui et al., 2015; Bouzidi et al., 2015b; Ftouhi et al., 2015a). Some young people succeeded in obtaining support from agricultural support programmes that are not specifically geared towards youth (Abdellaoui et al., 2015; Bouzidi et al., 2015b; Quarouch et al., 2015). However, generally, young people manage farms that are operated informally and few young people manage to obtain support targeting farms that have a formal status (Amichi et al., 2015a and b).

In Thailand, various national programmes and local initiatives support the engagement of young people in farming and take the diverse modes of youth engagement in farming into account (Phiboon et al., 2019). Some support schemes provide training in organic farming, others support entrepreneurial approaches, and still others train future leaders in rural communities. However, these programmes and initiatives mainly provide training but do little to support access to productive resources (Phiboon et al., 2019). Overall, the resources allocated to supporting the engagement of young people in farming do not reflect the importance this issue has in national agricultural strategies in Thailand (Faysse et al., 2019).

Existing programmes to support young people's engagement in farming do have shortcomings. In Tunisia (Gharbi et al., 2018) and in Thailand (Phiboon et al., 2019), programmes to allocate public land to young farmers aimed to maximise the number of beneficiaries. This led to a situation whereby each beneficiary received a plot that is much too small to be able to earn one's living farming. In North Africa and Thailand, agricultural educational organisations mostly train engineers and technicians. There are few capacity-building programmes specifically geared to teaching people how to set up and manage a farm (i.e. farming practices, business plans, marketing, etc.).

Because of the limited resources allocated to public programmes to support the engagement of young people in agriculture and because young people have difficulty accessing support that targets established farmers, **most of farmers interviewed in the research presented here do not interact or interact only occasionally with public programmes to support agriculture** (Naouri et al., 2015; Phiboon et al., 2019).

Young people have different needs and wishes depending on the way they want to engage in agriculture (Bouzidi et al., 2015b; Phiboon et al., 2019). Public policies did not pay much attention to these different needs and wishes. This is mainly due to the lack of knowledge about the different forms of engagement. One reason is that there are few organisations in North Africa and Thailand able to represent young people in front of public authorities. Rural young people are seldom considered as legitimate partners in the design public policies (Amichi et al., 2015a; Faysse et al., 2019).

Moreover, programmes to support the engagement of young people are not sufficiently linked to a global vision about what the future for family farming should be. For instance, the national agricultural strategy launched in 2020 in Morocco plans to provide support for young people in the form of training and funding and to help young people develop agricultural service cooperatives. They help young people start individual farming projects on collective land (Kadiri and Er-rayhany, 2019). However, the plan does not specify which farming model (intensive use of chemicals, agro ecology, etc.) will be supported.

Perspectives

Supporting young people's engagement in agriculture can be based on designing specific schemes to help them access productive resources or on giving them a specific place when selecting beneficiaries of development projects or land concession programmes. Such

support should not be limited to material resources and reinforcing capacity-building opportunities would be worthwhile.

These support schemes need to be based on a **better understanding of the aspirations and projects of young people in agriculture (e.g., full-time farming, multi-activity, running a service provision company) and the constraints that young people face in each type of engagement.**

This point is also relevant in high per capita income countries which already have policies to support young people's engagement in farming. In France and in Japan, policies to support engagement in farming have been designed based on a model of full-time farming. They do not take into account the increasingly different ways young people engage in farming today (D'Allens and Leclair, 2015; McGreevy et al., 2019).

Finally, in order to enable more frequent and productive encounters between public actors and rural youth who want to engage in agriculture (or who would be willing to do so under certain conditions), it would be useful to strengthen youth organisations and to include representatives of these organisations when discussing public support schemes and more generally the future of agriculture.

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