

# The Good Life: Agriculture Transformation and the Pursuance of Goals in Two Rural Villages of Northeastern Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

Agricultural transformation of the developing world encompasses a broad set of subjects, usually revolving around the change in the mode of production and related aspects of production. However, the extent to which the transformation shapes subjective wellbeing is largely under explored. This paper examines how the constructed life goals of local people are shaped by the process of agricultural transformation and how they strive to attain wellbeing. We are especially interested in the ways rural dynamics are changing as a result. The empirical data is based on a two-village study using qualitative methods. The good life of rural people is classified into five types of life goals, including good health, decent quality of education and future employment opportunity for youth, good family relationships, having enough for living and eating, and self-sufficiency. Good health encompasses both the strength of the physical body and spiritual. The agricultural transformation has emerged new challenges to health, particularly the chemical use in agriculture that deteriorated the quality of the environment. The decent quality of education and future employment are attributed to education qualification and jobs with monthly salary. The high competition and the lack of social and political networks have lowered the expectation of rural people from getting government jobs. The transformation resulted in split types of family due to migration, while rural people remain highly valued good family relationships, in which modern technology such as cell phone play a part in maintaining distance interaction and good relations. Having enough for eating and living reflects the high priority that rural people giving on foods and housing. This is associated with the growing indebtedness that is threatening the loss of lands and property that are used for debt collateral. Finally, the self-sufficiency that was initiated by King Bhumipol is seen and adopted as a promising means to achieve a good life, however, self-sufficiency is variously defined.

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## KEYWORDS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Agricultural transformation is a subject that has long been studied, but the subject continues to be an area of contention. One of the concurrent and unresolvable debates has been on the persistent ‘traditional mode of production’ of the developing world. In Southeast Asia, the interests of agricultural transformation have been recently shifted to ‘hyperglobalisation’, marketization, and livelihood diversification, while the ‘peasant past’ remains. Hirsch (2012) notes that two forms of capitalist production evolved in Southeast Asia. First is the establishment of large-scale plantations, such as for palm oil in Indonesia and Malaysia and sugarcane plantations. The expansion of large-scale agricultural production takes a form of land concession in Cambodia and Laos. Second is contract farming where the control on means of production is limited to modern technology for fodder, animal drugs, pesticides, and market channels. In the latter case,

the presence of capitalism in the rural south does not dissolve rural ‘family farms’, albeit lives and livelihoods are increasingly ‘de-linking’ from the land (Rigg et al., 2012).

There has been a general idea among less developed countries that the expansion of capitalism and the diffusion of modern technologies from western economies will result in ‘structural changes’ – from agriculture or small-scale subsistent production, into an industrial-based structure in which manufacturing industries’ outputs are greater than agriculture. Lewis (1954) argued that the dominant form of agriculture of developing countries entails both underemployment and unemployment, and this provides the opportunity to shift surplus labor to modern industrial sectors. The government could play an active role in this structural transformation by taking the lead role in infrastructure development, such as providing incentives for the private sector to forge the expansion of industries. This model predicts the scale of migration of rural people into urban and modern industries. After the Second War, most developing governments to varying degrees, used this neoclassical transformation model to guide their country’s development. They tried to scale-up industries in their economies.

Although the changes following the use of the above-mentioned model are evident, agriculture continues to employ larger proportions of the labor force in developing countries, and this generates the endless debate over the ‘mode of production’ (Boesen, 2007). There has also been a growing recognition of the importance of agriculture beyond the modes of production, such as food, climate, etc. However, the focus of these debates is very much on the ‘objective’ conditions of living of farmers. Where the subjective aspects are taken into account, most studies focus on the political realm, seeing the peasant ideology being shaped by the superstructure (Kahn, 1985). Studies on farmer resistance generated from within peasant communities on the domination from wider socioeconomics are under-represented. The studies of dynamic interactions between objective and subjective living conditions are virtually not existent.

Economic change in Thailand has been rapid since the embarkation on The First National Development Plan in the 1960s. In the early 1990s, Thailand had almost graduated into the ‘Newly-Industrialized Countries’ (NICs), but the subsequent stagnant growth resulted in Thailand being trapped in the middle-income group (Rigg et al., 2014). Although the overall changes were evident, studies and observations on agricultural transformation are mixed. Large scale migration of the labor force from rural areas into urban industries was reported from the early 1960s (Fuller et al., 1985), however, the agricultural sector remains the largest employer of the labor force in the country until today. Migration takes a distinctive form in that migrants continue to maintain relationships with their native villages, a number of them wish to return to agriculture and spend their old age in rural areas. Choenkwan & Fisher (2018) proposed that the cash crops such as rubber, cassava, coffee, ginger, tomato, pomelo, etc., do not dissolve the rural mode of production, but rather are a source of re-imagining future possibilities in rural Thailand, for example, the extension of agro-tourism into the agricultural sector.

Moreover, rubber planted by smallholders as agroforestry systems correspond to the new approach of the ‘Sufficiency Economy Philosophy’ in which farmers believe that agroforestry is also a part of the sufficiency economy (Penot et al., 2022). Podhisita, (2017) argues that the expansion of capitalism led to the growing adoption of cash crops (the incorporation of the market), and the adoption of new agricultural technologies and innovations among rural producers. The integration into capitalism results in a peculiar form of household, often referred to as a ‘skipped generation household’, where the household has old - grandparents and their young grandchildren (age below 15) living by themselves most of the time without the presence of adult

members of working age (Podhisita, 2017). Those who work in agriculture are aging, a consistent pattern occurring around the world (Rigg et al., 2020).

The alternative explanations of the persistent mode of production and variations within this research originate from two main theories. First is the moral economy of the peasant (Scott, 1976), suggesting that the action of peasants is guided by and can be understood by the subsistence concern of the peasant. Scott argued that fear of food shortages and a peasant ethics in which security is prioritized explain the actions such as resistance to innovation and the desire to own land even at some cost in terms of income and relationships with other people. The strategies peasants adopted in response to their insecurity are in line with the idea of 'self-exploitation' proposed by Chayanov (1966).

Another theory that breaks from the conventional analysis of agrarian transformation, focusing on micro analysis, can be characterized by Sustainable Livelihood Frameworks (SLF), (Chambers & Conway, 1991; DFID, 1999; Scoones, 1998). This concept broadens the views of capital, (by using the expression of capital assets), to explain the combination of types of livelihoods rural households undertake. The diverse forms of capital assets rural households command (own, having access) open wider options for earning a living than was assumed by traditional notions of capital. The SLF thus explains the persistence of rural family farming; they are able to diversify 'livelihood strategies' that allow them to sustain their production beyond the limit conceived by conventional theories. The SLF has been widely adopted. However, where the diversity of rural livelihoods is leading to and what the implications of diversity of rural livelihoods would mean on agrarian transformation in the long run, remains cloudy.

The SLF has quickly and widely been adopted as a lens into rural poverty. This in part expands the multi-dimensional analysis of rural poverty, but partly also modifies policies regarding poverty reduction. During the past few decades, poverty analysis has, evidently, been informed by Amartya Sen's 'functioning capability' (Sen, 1993; 1999) approach. Sen challenges the utilitarianism view in welfare economics that poverty reduction can be achieved not only through providing opportunities (such as improving infrastructures, providing credits, etc.) but also the freedom of people to exploit choices. Often, the SLF demonstrates 'wellbeing' as an integral part of SLF outcomes.

Wellbeing is generally classified into two groups: subjective and objective wellbeing. Objective wellbeing refers to the material living conditions, sometimes referred to as 'need satisfiers' (such as education, employment, incomes, etc. – see Doyal & Gough, 1991). Subjective wellbeing, in contrast, involves subjective conditions of living such as 'happiness' 'life satisfaction', quality of life, etc. All of these can be captured under the notion of the good life (Fischer, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The quest for the good life is the central part of being human, as explained by the great philosopher Aristotle "...Clearly, it is human virtue that we should be examining, for what we were seeking, too, was the good and happiness for man; and by 'human virtue' we mean not that of the body but that of the soul..." (Aristotle, 1975). The good life is 'subjective' wellbeing which is defined as satisfaction with life as a whole, including the presence of positive and absence of negative effects (Diener, 1984; Camfield et al., 2010). Therefore, it is possible to understand subjective wellbeing through a good life or life goals (Promphakping et al., 2021).

This paper offers an analysis of the interactions between subjective wellbeing and the changes in objective living conditions of rural people involved in agricultural transformation. As mentioned earlier, the previous accounts of agricultural transformation in Thailand are mixed, with most giving more emphasis on objective

living conditions. Guided by the SLF, we consider subjective wellbeing as an integral part of SLF outcomes. We argue that the wider socioeconomic environments are not only providing the opportunity, but are also shaping the life goals of local people. They employed household assets to appropriate life goals, which in turn also resulted in changes at the local level.

The subsequent sections are divided into three parts. The second section describes materials and methods to obtain data, and followed by the third section that introduces the background to the study sites. The fourth section presents findings, and finally the discussion and conclusion are presented.

## 2. METHODS

Our research aims to reveal subjective dimensions of wellbeing of people living in rural settings. We identified and selected two villages purposively, based on the distinctive features of both villages (this will be presented in the next section). The criteria guiding us to select the two village are based on the degrees on which rural villages are integrated into the wider economy; one is deeply integrated as signified by the high degree of cottage industries, the other is considered at a lower level of integration. We began our empirical research from community studies; the second and the third authors resided in the villages over the period of three months.

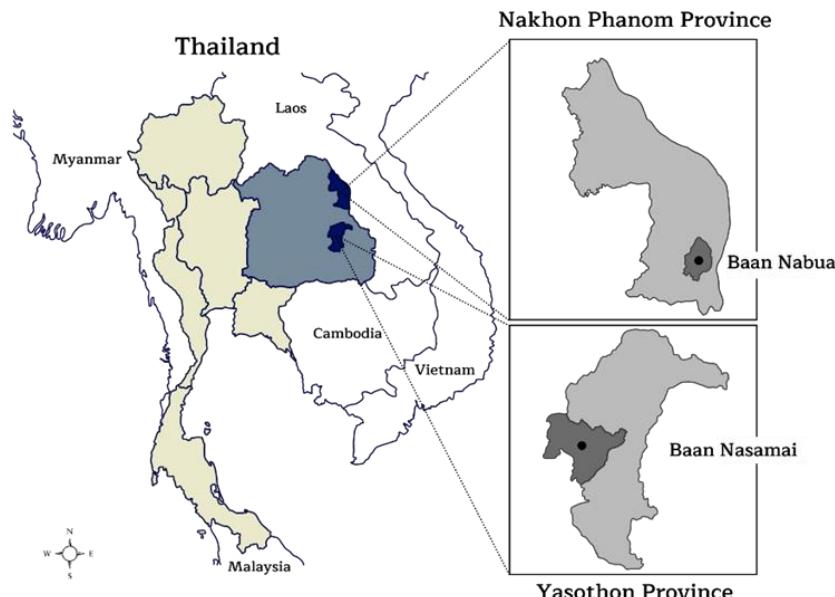
Baan Nabua has a population of 318 households/1,287 persons and Baan Nasamai has a population of 687 households/2,232 persons. Baan Nabua is located about 60 kms from the provincial town of Nakhon Phanom, while Baan Nasamai is just out of the urban skirt of Yasothon town, approximately 15 kms away from the urban center. The road that links the two villages and provincial towns, and adjacent areas are paved, and transport by road is good in all seasons. The availability of modern services in Baan Nabua, such as small convenience shops, car care services, cottage industries, etc are more prevalent, while in Baan Nabua there are just only a few groceries and noodle shops. There is government health centers, elementary schools and Buddhist temples in both villages. There is a secondary school in Baan Nasamai, while the nearest secondary school to Baan Nabua is in Renunakorn District town which is 15 kms away from the village. Secondary schools' children from Baan Nabua commute, using their own or shared motorbikes with friends. As primary education is compulsory (from elementary to secondary grade 6, or from elementary to grade 3 of secondary school with another 3 years of vocational school), most of the people in both villages aged below 40 completed secondary school (and some also have 3 years' vocational training qualifications).

In collecting the empirical data, we identified 28 households, 15 from Baan Nabua and 13 from Baan Nasamai to conduct in-depth interviews with. These key informants were identified and selected through stratifying groups of the residents into three groups (justified by community leaders), these are the rich, the middle-income and the poor. The selected informants were chosen to ensure all three stratified groups were represented. The 28 households we interviewed included 14 from the middle group, 8 were from the poor and 6 were from the rich respectively. We asked key informants what constitutes 'wellbeing' (a good life) that you are aspiring for, and how could you achieve it? This question is deployed to reflect the 'thinking' aspect of wellbeing (McGregor, 2007; Manorom & Promphakping, 2015). The data collected was analyzed using content analysis. The findings of the constructed wellbeing were structured by the themes that commonly appeared across interviews. All interviewees were re-visited and re-interviewed to add some missing information and to ensure accuracy.

### 3. THE BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES OF TWO AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

Baan Nabua is a small village of the Puthai ethnic group, located in a remote rural area of Nakhon Phanom province in northeast Thailand. Nakhon Phanom is bordered by the Lao PDR. During the 1960s and the early 1980s the region was among the most active communist areas and Baan Nabua was known to the public as the ‘communist village’ (Promphakping et al., 2017). In these circumstances, the integration of Baan Nabua to the wider economy was interrupted. It was like this until 1981 when the government issued an amnesty decree known as the Order of the Office of the Prime Minister no. 66/2523, that those who had joined the communist movement returned to their villages. Baan Nabua village resumed normal life; the villagers earned their living from agriculture, together with some family members who migrated to earn incomes from outside the village. (Promphakping et al., 2017). The destination of migrants from both villages were modern urban centers, particularly Bangkok and the Eastern Seaboard (Rayong, Chonburi, and Pattaya).

While the villagers of Baan Nabua experienced disconnection from the outside world due to the armed conflict, Baan Nasamai was well integrated into the wider economy. The location of the village was on the intersection of an ancient trading route. As a result, the villagers were exposed to trading well before the advent of the modern development of Thailand (began in 1960s). After the start of the Economic and Social Development Plan (1961), the incorporation of Baan Nasamai into the wider economy was even stronger. A strong background on trading, together with new entrepreneurial skills acquired through migration after the 1960s evolved different types of non-farm enterprises that provide forces propelling economic, social and cultural transformation in Baan Nasamai.



**Figure 1.** Studied sites' location (Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai)

From the late 1980 onwards, Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai experienced more or less the same set of rural development policies. The integration of both villages into the wider economy shows a number of commonalities. Our interviews with key informants

revealed that, there are significant numbers of people from both villages who migrated to urban centers to earn incomes, while maintaining relationships with their villages and villagers. However, the types of work that they undertook, and the destinations differed; while people from Baan Nabua engaged in small businesses such as street peddlers, small food restaurants in Bangkok, and Pattaya, and overseas jobs (Taiwan and South Korea), people from Baan Samai mostly worked as semi or skilled laborers in factories. The villagers of Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai continued with rice farming, but the rice farmers of Baan Nasamai used newer technologies and more modern agricultural inputs than Baan Nabua, such as tractors, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers. The possible explanation for the difference of use of intensive technologies could be the ability to invest – which the farmers of Baan Nasamai tended to have a higher ability to invest in modern technologies than the farmers of Baan Nabua. Another explanation could be different levels of labor shortages – as a higher numbers of workers from Baan Nasamai turned to engage in off-farm employments, as there were a number of cottage industries in the village, whereas in Baan Nabua, factories didn't exist.

One distinct feature that was deployed to boost the development of Baan Nabua was the historical endowment of the communist legacy. The site where gunfights took place near the village compound was designated as a site to erect a memorial statue and historical landmark. August 7<sup>th</sup> – the date of the gunfight (1965) – was decided to be a ceremonial day. The event is meant to pay tribute to the members who lost their lives during the armed conflict, but also an attraction for the wider public and tourists. Baan Nabua has been promoted by local government to be an eco-tourism site.

While the Baan Nabua development plan relied on historical endowment to boost the local economy, the Baan Nasamai one was based on hard skills and knowledge transferred from factory work and inherited from their ancestors. In fact, there were types of cottage industries that existed in Baan Nasamai a long time before, including basketry and traditional pillow workshops (skills inherited from ancestors), brass products and woodcrafts (skills acquired through migration). During the last two decades, the rural enterprises in the village grew evidently. The village has turned into a 'rural entrepreneur' community where types of services and cottage industries proliferated. The new cohorts of owners of these businesses include younger generations who graduated from universities, or obtained certificates from vocational training colleges. The services include electricity contractors' systems for large buildings, air conditioning systems, car care services, coffee shops, construction contractors, local convenience stores, etc.

#### **4. THE CONSTRUCTED LIFE GOALS AND THE PURSUANCE OF A GOOD LIFE**

The proverbs of the Northeast inscribed six desirable life goals that were highly prioritized and pursued by most people in the northeast previously. These life goals are: 'having food (rice), having land, having spouse, having money or wealthy assets (such as gold), having good shelter (big wooden house), being cared for by children, and observing religion in old age. Those who possess a high level of these in the list are considered as '*mi kwam suk*' which literally means happiness. However, as will be discussed below, the life goals we found were significantly altered. In our research we communicated with the interviewees by using the local dialects as '*yu di mi heang*' (*yu di* literally means living well, while *mi heang* can be equated to healthy, both physically and mentally) to equate with a good life. We did not rank the items that were reported, but they are also ordered according to the number of mentions.

#### 4.1 Good health

When we asked what was considered as a good life to lead from the respondent's perspective, good health was most frequently mentioned by interviewees. This is common across the rich, the middle-income and the poor. Good health refers to the 'strength' of both body and spiritual health. Bodily strength is usually defined by the absence of illness. A farmer from Baan Nasamai mentioned to us that local people usually greet each other for good health as 'keep away from illness' (local words are *kwam jeb yah hai dai, kwam khai yah hai m*). The spiritual strength largely referred to the state of mind without worries and stress.

There are many reasons why good health is given a high priority. One of the most important ones is that having good health is a key condition to obtaining a source of living (income), while bad health can easily erode the livelihood of the family. A farmer of the lower group (poor) from Baan Nabua told us that although hospitalization costs are now covered by universal coverage welfare, there are other associated costs such as transportation and food for the care givers accompanying the patient during hospitalisation. In cases where illness occurs with breadwinners, the livelihoods of households can be seriously depleted, which could force them to sell off their properties or take out loans.

It is important to note that the sources of poor health have significantly altered from before the advent of chemical usage in agriculture and the prevalence of modern consumption methods in the community, particularly cooked food in plastic bags. We observed, and the statistics of Sub-District Health Promotion Hospital revealed to us that there is a growing prevalence of non-communicative diseases, particularly diabetes and blood pressure, both are new and current ill-health phenomena. A farmer from Baan Nasamai said to us in a joke that today when people greet each other they say, 'I wish you are safe from diabetes'. Diabetes is usually accompanied with high blood pressure and heart disease (Tsimihodimos et al., 2018). The growing prevalence of non-communicative diseases comes from two main sources, first is the change of diet, and secondly the chemical use in agriculture. We observed that most people are mostly relying on food from local groceries. Villagers view that their present lives are more convenient than before because food is everywhere, and they have money to buy different foods. The food that is available in groceries are both pre-cooked in plastic bags and fresh food such as vegetables, meat, fish, etc. In Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai, there are 10 and 15 groceries respectively. Much of the food on offer is generally low in nutritional quality, and there can be a lack of hygiene. Cooked food is often heavily flavoured with monosodium glutamate to improve the taste. It is generally agreed, even among the villagers, that this all contributes to the growing prevalence of diabetes.

Chemical usage in agriculture is another source of poor health. In Baan Nabua, rice farming has changed from transplanting to the broadcasting method. The transplanting method uses intensive human labor to transplant the rice seedlings on the soaked land from which the weeds were removed. Right after the transplanting, farmers can fill the transplanted plot with water to control the weeds. In the broadcasting method, the rice seed is spread on dry land, albeit with the right moisture in the soil. The broadcasting method starts in the early rainy season. The moisture germinates the seeds, meanwhile it is also good for the weeds to grow. Farmers cannot use water to control the weeds because water will stop the germination of the rice seeds. Farmers normally use chemical weed control to stop the weeds. The change to a new method is also due to shortages of labor, as transplanting requires more labor than broadcasting. The heavy use of chemical weed control could possibly cause the ill health of the villagers.

Although good health is commonly listed as a desirable life goal to pursue across the rich and the poor, the way to get health services in case of illness is rather different. As mentioned before, health services in Thailand have become a universal coverage, but the types of health welfare are classified into 3 systems: 1) Social Security Fund for those who employed in formal sectors in which by law the employers and employees make compulsory co-payments to the Fund, 2) Government Staff Benefits, that cover a range of welfare benefits, including child education, health services for the staff and their family members (wife, child under 20, and parents). The health benefit plan of the government staff is considered to be the premium one, and 3) the National Health Security Fund, for those who are not employed in formal sectors and are not government staff. The National Health Security Fund provides health services (pays the costs of health services to the health services providers) and are responsible for 48.264 million people, representing about 67 percent of the total population of the Country (National Health Security Office: nhso.go.th). The majority of the people in the two villages we studied are eligible for the last type of health welfare, only a few of them are government staff or formal sector employees. Although the quality of health care under the provision of NHSO (the government hospitals, and government health service systems) is acceptable, some better-off households use private clinics or hospitals. This is partly due the belief that they provide a higher quality of service than the government hospitals, but mostly it is to do with the comforts and hospitalities of the private health services.

#### **4.2 Decent education quality and good jobs for children**

The members of families we interviewed expressed their strong wish for their children to obtain a decent quality of education so that they can get a good job to support the family. A decent education and a good job for children are listed among the top goals that rural people are pursuing. In the past, most rural people wanted their children to get government jobs. This was primarily because parents of government servants are also entitled to state servants' benefits which are privilege and premium ones. The government jobs are life-time employment until retirement. Thus, employees are secure from being unemployed. In addition, the benefits, such as housing, education of kids and health insurance (which covers the kids, spouse and parents) are provided, and these benefits are higher than any other types of employment benefits in Thailand.

In Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai, only a few young people can get government jobs due to the high competition. In addition, to obtain a government job usually requires a good connection to high-ranking authorities and sometimes high-priced bribes. In this respect, most villagers today do not expect their children to get a government job. The villagers of Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai expressed their view that a 'good job' at present is '*mi ngern deon*' – having a monthly salary. A household-head woman of Baan Nasamai mentioned to us that:

*"I don't expect and don't push my son to get a government job. My duty is to put effort into supporting him (her son) in education. What subject he wants to study and what jobs he wants to do is up to him, as long as he gets a permanent job with a monthly salary."*

The wish for a decent quality of education and good jobs is common across the poor and the rich, however, the ability to fund children's education and the attainment levels are varied. Compulsory education (12 years' schooling, i.e., elementary (6 years) and secondary (6 years) education are generally insufficient to get a good job. Studying at university and higher vocational college, although partly subsidized by the government, requires funding, which is unaffordable for some households. Since 1998, the

government has established a Student Loan Fund, which students can borrow money from, and repayment is required when they complete their studies and get a job. This extends the access to higher education to students with limited support from their parents. However, a number of students discontinue education after the compulsory years of schooling, and opt to start seeking jobs, mostly for the reason that parents are unable to continue the funding support. Similarly, some children are required and demanded to support their families when teenagers. Whereas the rich families in the village encourage their children to pursue higher education, with the view that this could enable them to get a good job.

The wish for a decent quality of education and good job for kids effectively drove the young generation to migrate to urban centers – the provincial towns, Bangkok, etc, as a good quality of education and good jobs with monthly salaries are concentrated in the urban centers. At present, the good jobs are highly competitive, as the younger generation obtain university degrees and enter the labor markets. However, at the same time, the businesses sectors also complain of shortage of skilled workers (Poapongsakorn et al., 2012). This is the result of the social values of Thai people, both rural and urban, that wish their children to obtain university degrees, while vocational school is considered to be for a lower income group. The discrepancies between labor markets and skills or subjects offered in higher education have become challenging for education in Thailand.

It is important to note that there is a growing trend of migrants returning to the villages. Some of these returners obtained university degrees, and some of them obtained knowledge and skills from working outside of the village. In Baan Nabua, we found one farmer who breeds crocodiles for export, and a few who raise cattle using modern farming techniques (keep the cows in the barn rather than in grazing, feeding with intensive fodder). In Baan Nasamai, the community enterprises mentioned earlier offered employment opportunities for the youth. In addition, the rural enterprises are extending. For example, a person in his mid-thirties who obtained an engineering degree from university and was employed by a company, ceased his job and returned home. Drawing on his experiences and his networks, he set up his own business, combining power systems, air conditioning and house construction. His business further extends employment opportunities for the youth in Baan Nasamai who were trained in vocational schools. In this context, the wish for a decent quality of education and jobs for young people is attainable partly through the expansion of rural enterprises.

#### **4.3 Good family relationships**

Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai villagers said to us in our interviews that a good family relationship is important for them. The aspiration for good family relations reflects the dynamism of rural families that are undergoing transformation. As mentioned earlier, a number of family members stay separately. Young members are schooled or working in urban centers (Provincial towns or Bangkok), daughters or sons, sons-in-law or daughters-in-laws or sometimes the family head are away from home during certain periods or most of the year. A villager from Baan Nabua revealed to us that it is common for overseas workers to be away from home for one to five consecutive years. A number of urban workers leave their children to be raised up by their parents who remain in the villages while they work in urban centers. In short, rural families are physically breaking up. In these circumstances, rural people aspire for good family relationships.

Good family relationships, in this context, are reinforced in two ways. One is maintaining contacts, such as a short visit by urban migrants during public vacations or ceremonies, for example, New Year's Eve, the Songkran festival, and others. All

interviewees with family members migrating said to us that the migrant members return to visit the families in the village at least once a year. During the visit, particularly during the festivals, there are big feasts and celebrations with relatives and friends in the village. The feasts and celebrations of overseas migrants returning home are usually grander. At present, communication between members working away and those living in the village via the internet and mobiles are much easier and more convenient than before. The second method for reasserting a good relationship with the family is remittances. All interviewees with migrant members reported that they received remittances from migrant members. The regularity and the amount of the remittances, however, varied.

From 28 households that we interviewed (15 from Baan Nabua and 13 from Baan Nasamai), there are 11 households having members who migrated (39 percent of the interviewed households), 7 from Baan Nabua and 4 from Baan Nasamai. Only two of the migrants sent remittances regularly and two of them were overseas migrants, the money sent home was reported to be about 1 to 1.5 thousand Baht per month. However, during the initial phase of working overseas, the remittances are usually spent on repaying debts, which could take around 2 – 3 years. The domestic migrants were also reported to be sending remittances, but not regularly and the amounts are varied. The reason is that the wages of domestic workers are low, while the living expenses are high compared to their earnings. A woman said in the interview that, her son who works in Bangkok and returns to visit her in the village; she sometimes has to give him money for the bus tickets for the return. The amount of money domestic migrants remitted home was around 1 - 3 thousand Baht per month.

As mentioned above, the mobile phone has played a significant role in bridging relationships among dispersing family members. The same woman whose son is working in Bangkok said to us that her son calls and chats almost every day. Even within the village, young people from a short distance are communicating with their friends via mobile phones and the internet. Some observers see that the growth of this type of communication will distance people from face-to-face communication and will undermine relationships. However, in the circumstances where family members are dispersed, the mobile phone is an important way to keep family members in contact, enhancing their relationships.

#### **4.4 Having enough for living and eating**

Villagers we interviewed consistently mentioned that ‘having enough for living and eating’ (in local words *poh yu poh kin*) is their aspiration, the subjective aspect that reflects the moral principles of peasants that give a high priority to subsistence or security (Scott, 1976). Almost all interviewees raised their concerns to us during the interviews that they experienced having their incomes lower than the expenses. A woman from Baan Nabua from the middle-income group said to us that it is difficult for her to memorise all the expenses of the family each year. The lists of spending in her household include daily food, education of children, electricity and water bills, clothes, gasoline for motor bike, contributions (donations) to the community ceremonies or parties of neighbours, investment in household agriculture and debt payment. Our observation revealed that about 50% of households in Baan Nasamai and a few households in Baan Nabua own pickup trucks and cars. Every household uses mobile phones and plenty of modern or urban-styled houses were found. Luxury household appliances such as air conditioning were also commonly found. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the deficits may partly be due to expenses on goods for comfort or convenience, and this relates to the growing indebtedness of rural households. The explanations for the consumption that goes beyond the ability to earn may be vastly

varied, but the growing urbanized consumption could be among several reasons for the consumption that results in the growing indebtedness of rural people.

Indebtedness is also partly due to investment in agricultural inputs, which is relatively high compared to returns from agriculture, due to the fluctuation of market prices. Although farmers realized that they could more than likely make a loss, not only due to the global markets, but also due to the monopoly of the middle man, farmers continue to grow, for instance, rice. This spurred the debates as to whether rice farmers are making decision based on the calculations of returns or other reasons than 'economic reasons' (Thanapornpan, 1983). Our interviews revealed that debt service is among the top five expenditure items in rural households. Our records of debts of 28 households shows that the remaining borrowing of the households at the date of our interview (on average) was about 145,913 THB. The average size of debts of the households of Baan Nabua were slightly higher than the households of Baan Nasamai, which were 152,714 THB and 135,333 THB, respectively.

These households reported that they borrowed for; (1) investment in agriculture, off-farm activities and overseas migration, (2) house construction or repair, (3) child education, (4) daily food consumption, and (5) debt repayment. These investments are varied both among the interviewed households and between the villages, in which Baan Nabua tends to invest higher in agriculture than Baan Nabua, i.e., 62,350 THB and 23,088 THB per year, respectively. Investments in agriculture include fertilizers, machinery and hiring laborers. The average investment in agriculture for Baan Nasamai households is higher than Baan Nabua. However, as agriculture is no longer the main source of income, repayment of debts from agricultural returns is unlikely. A farmer said:

*I have been borrowing money from BAAC [Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperative) for many years and it seems to be endless. Incomes from agriculture are not enough to pay off the debt, and I need my daughter who is working away to help. Close to the due date of the BAAC debt payment, I cannot sleep at night, as I keep thinking how to mobilise enough money to pay off the debts. I may have to borrow money from relatives or money lenders to pay to BAAC to be eligible for a new loan. In this case, almost all new borrowing of BAAC will go to my relatives or money lenders. A number of my neighbours are similarly trapped in this circle.*

The above quote indicates that although villagers are comfortably having enough for eating, many of them are chained to indebtedness. The ability to pay-off debts and falling into the debt cycle puts their future of having enough for living and eating in jeopardy. Although all 28 households confirmed to us in the interviews that they are confident in their ability to pay off the debts, there are a few cases of losing the property because of indebtedness. In addition, unexpected events could deplete their sources of incomes, ranging from climate calamities, the fluctuation of market prices or economic crises to the sudden loss of life of family members. The farmers' ability to subsist could be weakened or finding themselves unable to cope with these shocks.

#### **4.5 Sufficiency**

While the "having enough for living" mentioned above often refers to everyday circumstances, sufficiency is meant to refer to the ideological aspect to be installed in farmers. The villagers of Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai ascribed the sufficiency to King Rama IX who 'discovers' and proposes the means for farmers to survive within the increasingly precarious world.

Most interviewees mentioned to us that the ‘sufficiency’ idea is among their aspirations, albeit the meaning of sufficiency is varied. They asserted that they believe in and want to follow their great father (in Thai words poh luang, literally means King Bhumipol). The sufficiency idea has infused public policies in the past few decades. The definition of sufficiency is rather broad, comprising the middle path, reasonability and self-immunisation (Mongsawad, 2010). The ‘*middle path*’ idea or moderation means – not doing something too little or too much at the expense of oneself or others, for example, producing and consuming at a moderate level. The ‘*reasonability*’ idea means rational decision making, with consideration of the factors involved and careful anticipation of the outcomes that may be expected from such action. The ‘*self-immunisation*’ idea refers to ‘risk management’ by preparing to cope with the likely impact and changes in various aspects and considering the probability of future situations (Chaipattana Foundation, 2023). The sufficiency notion has been highly praised in Thailand by public and government, partly because any criticism of ‘sufficiency’ could mean criticism of the King which is unlawful. However, international academics have sometimes criticized the sufficiency idea. For example, Walker (2007) describes the indicators of the sufficiency economy as comprising agricultural land devoted to subsistence crops and a high percentage of income derived from local production. Therefore, a sufficiency economy can be practically equated to poverty.

The practices of the sufficiency notion are varied, and sometimes are inconsistent with the three principles mentioned above. For example, some villagers often refer to agriculture that aims primarily to meet the family consumption needs. Others consider the main feature of sufficiency as a control of one’s greed. The government programs concerned with the sufficiency of small farmers involves the rearrangement of the physical landscape of the plots, known as Kok-Nong-Na model. The plot is comprised of three types; the higher elevated part of the plot (*kok*) for cash crops, the low land for the water reservoir of the plot (*Nong*) and the middle-elevated land (*Na*) for rice growing. When we asked villagers to be more specific about what is the most important element of sufficiency, they were frequently referring to: ‘avoid having (too) high ambitions, eat what one has, do not aim to be wealthier, and avoid exploiting others.’ Also, ‘I am content with my state of being. I have my own house, I have enough food, and I can support my kid’s education. I am happy with all of these and this is for me sufficiency’.

Although the sufficiency policy aims to support small and poor farmers, the recent campaigns of the government seem to have involved the better-off or the upper-middle farmers, particularly those who do not rely on incomes from agriculture (S. Reongtam, communication, July 27, 2023). Within 28 households we interviewed, there were no households practicing sufficiency (Kok-Nong-Na model) at a full scale, except for saying that they ‘follow’ the guidance of the King. It is also interesting to note that there are increasingly available new small-scale and affordable technologies, such as solar energy (for plant watering), fodders agricultural tools, inputs, etc. These technologies are supportive for the sustenance and well suited to the ‘economy of scale’ of small farmers. We witnessed villagers from both villages using portable sets for solar energy in their farms. Intensive small-scale cow raising (number of cows are usually lower than 10, some owning only 2 or 3 cows), for instance, were widely found. These agricultural activities coincided with other activities, especially rice growing. These practices are also usually considered as encompassing the sufficiency notion.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Agriculture in Baan Nabua and Baan Nasamai is transforming, albeit to varying degrees of intensification and mechanization. Agricultural transformation has been accompanied by the diversification of types of livelihoods of the farmers. They are earning more and more of a living from off-farm employment, meanwhile continuing to cling on to agriculture, which is also changing. Farmers have altered their cultural values of a good life that were inscribed in the proverbs. The present good life or life goals include good health, decent education quality and good jobs for kids, good social relations, having enough for living and eating and sufficiency. The good life that was reconstructed during the agricultural transformation process and the efforts to achieve the goals are consonant to the function capability approach (Sen, 1993). The good life or the life goals that are listed can be considered as people ‘being and doing’. The subjective wellbeing (in this paper, the good life or the life goals) demonstrated by the SLF is therefore potentially offering a methodology of measuring and analysis of Amartya Sen’s functioning formulation, which is criticized as ‘radically unspecified’ (Robeyns, 2005).

Good health appears to be the most important of the life goals, and this finding is consistent with Doyal & Gough (1991)’s formulation, that health is considered as one of two (the other is autonomy) universal needs. However, the attainment of good health is largely shaped by capability (a set of opportunities) – the availability of health services that are primarily provided by the state. As mentioned earlier, the state provision of health was radically transformed from 2006, when Thaksin’s government initiated a universal coverage of health care. As a result, Thaksin’s Party thereafter gained popularity and support from rural people. It can be said that due to the limited options to achieve good health, rural people in Thailand are opting for the political party that offers them a means to achieve good health. A number of observers indicated that this phenomenon characterizes the change of relationships between political elites and rural voters, from individuals’ or patron-clients’ networks to more class-based relationships (de Jong et al., 2012, Phatharathananunth, 2016)

The decent quality of education and good jobs which is listed as one among five top life goals suggests that human resources are an important link between the wider socio-economic change and agricultural or rural sectors. Economic growth occurred in import substituted industries, and recently export-oriented industries have demanded a labor force from rural sectors, in which wages are generally lower. This growth therefore ‘pushes and pulls’ the labor force to migrate. In this scenario agricultural households strategically diversify the use of the household labor force. Some family members are supported and encouraged to seek jobs outside agriculture. The diversification of livelihood strategies that are based on human resources is consistent with the SLF formulation (Chambers & Conways, 1991; DFID, 1999; Scoones, 1998). However, the access to a good quality of education is difficult, not only due to the limited investment in education of rural households, but also the uneven distribution of a good quality of education (Sondergaard, 2015). Consequently, although migration from the agricultural sector into urban centers, particularly industrial construction, the informal urban economy and services, was evident, and these migrants were not significantly upwardly mobile. The higher incomes that migrants earned from modern sectors were at the expense of working hard, low urban living conditions, etc. The difficulty of achieving a decent quality of education therefore explains the return of migrants to their villages at a certain age – the situations that are described as ‘de-agrarianization and re-agrarianization’ (Hirsch, 2012).

The good family relationships that people prioritize among the top of the good life items is consonant to a number of previous studies (Podhisita, 2017; Shirai et al., 2017). However, the effort to continue good relationships among family members while staying apart (in urban and in rural settings) can be interpreted in two ways. First is that the continuity of relationships could prolong the persistence of the agricultural sector, as the relationships could mean the support that agricultural sectors get are derived from their family members who are working away from their villages. But, on the other hand, the continuity of relationships could also mean that rural or agricultural sectors are integrated into the modern economy in a broader way than are defined by economic aspects. In other words, the networks of family relationships between rural and urban settings can serve as a means for capitalism to derive more surplus from agricultural sectors to be reproduced or used outside agriculture, without changing the mode of production.

The having enough for living and eating notion, and the sufficiency economy that are listed among important goals seem to reflect the cultural subsistence ethic (Scott, 1976). However, the actions of sufficiency cannot be interpreted as resistance to capitalism. The having enough for living and eating is clearly related to the fears of the growing indebtedness that risks farmers' sustenance. The sufficiency economy that was proposed and has been promoted by the state is believed to be a mechanism to counter the indebtedness of farmers. The underlying issue of sufficiency being listed among the top five of the life goals is that the idea could be deployed by elites to maintain social relations that put small farmers at a disadvantage. However, the fluid meanings of the sufficiency economy can benefit farmers in two ways. Firstly, farmers can strategically insert their meanings or deploy specific meanings which are favorable to them, in dealing with and drawing support from the state bureaucracy. Secondly, the cultural ethic of subsistence remains strong and valid, resulting in the sufficiency economy programs quickly becoming popular among farmers. The investment and promotion of the sufficiency economy of the government could permit alternative paths of transformation, which are potentially going into different directions from what is conceived by neoliberal market capitalism.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The constructed good life that we discussed in this study has been shaped by transformation processes. This includes: the deterioration of the environment due to the use of toxic chemicals, the growing prevalence of unhealthy food, and the growing prevalence of non-communicative diseases that arouse concerns of people about their health. It is further influenced by the increasing importance of off-farm employment together with the demand for qualified, skilled laborers for urban industries. This results in the high priority of obtaining decent job qualifications by young people. Furthermore, family members are staying apart for longer periods due to their work demands affecting good family relationships. In addition, the principle of having enough for living and eating and the sufficiency notions highlight the transformation that breeds new types of consumption, resulting in the growing indebtedness that jeopardizes the sustenance of farmers.

However, the priority that is given to different items of the good life, the efforts they made to attain them and the extent to which these life goals are attained are varied depending on individuals and households. For instance, good health is commonly listed as the most important factor for a good life by the rich and the poor. However, the channels to attain good health, the quality of services and the ability of individuals and households to have the opportunity to maintain good health are vastly varied. The

efforts they made to attain the good life have reshaped rural dynamics. The new aspects are opportunities enabling rural people to achieve their being and doing, which is the good life as they conceived it.

Although rural people are disadvantaged in terms of agricultural transformation, namely in their challenges continuing farming, there are some opportunities that serve as potential alternative pathways. For instance, the cultural ethics of having enough for living and eating coupled with the availability of new technologies could provide opportunities for change and adaptation. Alternative paths could not only benefit rural farmers, but also could be good for the public or human kind in general. We recommend that further research concerned with the good life of local people look into how to measure the good life to be able to compare across local contexts or culture, or to consider whether adaptations could ensure the subjective wellbeing of farmers.

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