



## YOUTH AND AGRICULTURE IN NORTHERN LAOS

### “A systematic analysis of factors shaping youth participation in agriculture in the northern Lao PDR”

#### Findings and Insights

##### Introduction

While Lao youth, like others in the Mekong region, migrate in search of expanded opportunities, it may be a mistake to assume they prefer this option to farming. Some Lao youth involved in agriculture tell a more complex story. Many see a future in farming and agribusiness, provided it is supported by an enabling rural and agricultural system

Helvetas' Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service (LURAS) program has been working since 2014 in the country's upland regions to support local communities in developing sustainable and climate resilient cultivation practices that also offer improved income. Funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), LURAS is implemented by Helvetas with the Lao government's Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC). Aiming to create viable agriculture livelihood options for rural youth, LURAS's AGREE scheme works to strengthen youths' agricultural competencies and market access. AGREE's main activity components provide technical and business training for aspiring youth

“agripreneurs” as well as coaching throughout start-up and early implementation of an agribusiness project.

Helvetas helps facilitate research to inform and adapt its work, and to provide useful public information. In 2024, LURAS facilitated research for Valentine Copt’s study “A systematic analysis of factors shaping youth participation in agriculture in the northern Lao PDR.” This study engaged with the Lao youth to provide a broader perspective on their current and future involvement in the country’s agricultural sector.

## Country Context

Laos has made national economic shifts toward non-agriculture sectors in recent years. World Bank data indicates that the agriculture sector’s contribution to Laos’s GDP has declined from approximately 34% in 2000 to 15% in 2024. Still, agriculture remains the dominant livelihood sector, employing three-quarters of working youth, half of them as non-wage family workers.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 60% of the country’s population is under the age of 25, and fully 62% of those under 25 still reside in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> The uplands of Laos are home to many ethnic minority communities who have traditionally practiced subsistence agriculture—growing crops for their own consumption while also collecting food from the forests and rivers. Poverty in Laos is disproportionately high among smallholder farmers, individuals with limited formal education, minority ethnic groups, and those in remote areas. An estimated 75% of households living with poverty are headed by farmers or seasonally unemployed workers<sup>3</sup>. In northern Laos, approximately 30% of residents experience some degree of food insecurity. Some rural youth seek work in the informal sector and through migration. As in many other countries, youth mobility is a common response to low income, limited opportunities, and unstable and risky informal work. Household members who remain depend on support from mobile members, while those who migrate remain tied to household obligations.

New roads have improved access to remote areas, and government and foreign investors have promoted commercial agriculture for both the domestic market and for export. While contributing to an overall decline in poverty, this shift has also brought problems. The country has seen the destruction of forests, declining soil fertility, and an increase in environmentally unsustainable practices. Additionally, available agricultural jobs are often tenuous, with limited access to training, extension services, market links and productive resources. The extent of these challenges is reflected in the country’s high percent of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET rate). Nearly 40% of Lao youth aged 15–24 are not in education, employment, or training<sup>4</sup>. High NEET rates reflect underlying structural issues, including limited job access, precarious employment, constrained mobility, and early exit from formal education, especially in remote areas<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Manikham D, 2018. Youth and Agri-Entrepreneurship in Lao PDR. FFTC Agricultural Policy Platform (FFTC-AP). Accessed on 7.07.2024, <https://ap.fftc.org.tw/article/1340>

<sup>2</sup> LPRYU, 2014. Adolescent and Youth Situation Analysis. UNFPA Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

<sup>3</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau, World Bank, 2020. Poverty Profile in Lao PDR. Poverty Report for the Lao expenditure and Consumption Survey 2018-2019. Ministry of Planning and Investment. Accessed on 23.07.2025

<sup>4</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau, 2024. Lao PDR Gender Factbook: Bridging Economic and Social Empowerment Gaps. Ministry of Planning and Investment.

<sup>5</sup> ILO, 2020. Global employment trends for youth 2020: technology and the future of jobs. International labour office, Geneva.

## Study approach

### Objective

Copt's study explores the participation patterns in agriculture of Lao youth from four northern provinces. It aims to provide a better understanding of rural northern Lao youth decisions to stay in agriculture and/or seek alternative livelihoods, and how these decisions are influenced by a complex interplay of personal agency, economic opportunity, and external constraints. The study also evaluates the factors associated with youth participation in the AGREE scheme.

Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways do Lao youth engage in or disengage from the agricultural sector?
2. What structural and institutional barriers affect the decision of youth to participate in agriculture?
3. What are the perceptions and aspirations of Lao youth toward agriculture as a livelihood?



*Focus group participants in Xiengkhouang discuss livelihood challenges and aspirations with multi-generational women*

### Methodology

With field research conducted in 2024 – 2025, the study uses a comparative mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative data to capture both statistical trends and lived experiences. The study uses institutional theory and a market systems approach to analyze how structural barriers, institutional conditions, and youth agency shape youth livelihoods outcomes.

#### **Sample size field research in Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Oudomxay and Huaphan**

- Individual surveys: 130 youth (46 AGREE participants)
- 19 focus group discussions (96 non-AGREE youth)
- Individual interviews 21 stakeholders (parents and teachers)

#### **The study defines youth as 15-35 years, as stated by the Lao Youth Union (LPRY 2014)**

- 130 aged 15-35 surveyed across four provinces (46 AGREE participants, 84 non-participants)
- 19 focus group discussions were conducted in 14 districts with 96 non-participating youth
- 21 stakeholders (parents and teachers) interviewed

# Study Findings and Insights

## Attitudes about farming

### Lao youth balance tradition with aspiration

- 50% identify having a successful career as their top life goal
- 19% identify family well-being as their top priority
- 17% identify starting a business as their top priority

### A large majority of those interviewed see farming as a viable livelihood

Youth perceptions of agriculture are embedded in duality: they regard it as a desirable occupation – rooted in positive affect and cultural values – provided it can generate income and enable access to resources and services.

### *Attitudes about farming as a livelihood*

83% see farming as a potentially viable livelihood

80% believe it can improve their quality of life

66% describe it as a successful profession

### Those surveyed are ambivalent

- Only 46% consider farming profitable (60% of AGREE youth considered it profitable, while only 38% of non-AGREE youth agreed with this statement)
- 51% acknowledge that farming is challenging
- Most youth (62%) see farming as a respected profession, with AGREE participants more likely to hold this favorable opinion. Half of AGREE participants reject the view of farming as a “low status” profession. Non-AGREE youth are less likely to reject this view (33%).
- When asked whether they would leave farming if given the opportunity, those surveyed differed significantly: 79% of AGREE participants say they intend to continue farming compared with just 42% of AGREE non-participants. This gap likely reflects the AGREE youths’ exposure to training, technical support, and market linkages provided through the AGREE intervention.

### Envisioning a future

Youth interviewed see a future for themselves in their communities. Notably, a large majority of the respondents (85%) believe that young people could access leadership roles in their communities, with 65% already having leadership responsibilities within their households. A large majority (83%) express a desire to assume greater leadership responsibilities in their communities.

Positivity does not always translate into long-term commitment. AGREE youth are significantly more inclined than their peers to leave their villages—even if farming can provide a decent income. Fifty percent of AGREE respondents disagree with the statement “If I had a decent salary, I would stay in my village”. This may be attributable to expanded entrepreneurial aspirations, and transferable business and communication skills that allow for broader opportunities away from farming.

***“Farming is the foundation of life, everyone needs to consume every day, and I like this job because of the freedom of owning my own business”.***

*A young AGREE participant*

These mixed responses indicate that Lao youth acknowledge agriculture’s potential to provide economic and social benefits but are strongly aware of the constraints—unreliable market access, environmental shocks, limited finance—that limit the perceived profitability of agriculture as a long-term livelihood.

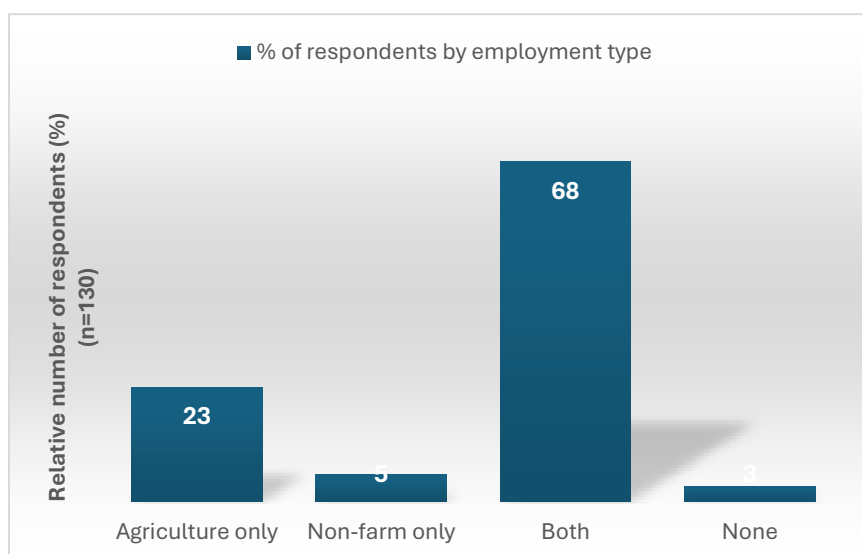
## Resilience strategies

While most also work in other sectors, a large majority of survey respondents see farming as a viable livelihood. This is a result of both direct economic need and the traditional “subsistence ethic”<sup>6</sup> of maintaining alternative sources of income as a safety net or fallback: if wage jobs fail or become untenable, people can return to the land to survive. Diversification is widespread but mostly reactive, driven by necessity rather than long-term planning.

### Most engage in several livelihood activities

Of the 92% of respondents who participate in agricultural activities, fully three quarters also have non-farm work. Over half say that their current agricultural income cannot support their families. This share is higher among AGREE participants (68%) than non-participants (60%), indicating that even trained youth face persistent structural barriers.

Fifty percent of youth engaged in both agricultural and non-farm activities report being unable to generate sufficient income to support their families. Having even multiple income-generating activities does not equate to financial security. Both AGREE and non-AGREE youth report similar economic vulnerabilities.



Proportion of surveyed youth engaged in agricultural, non-agricultural, or both types of activities, or who were not engaged in any activities

### Respondents engaged several livelihood activities

- 92% participate in agricultural activities
- 74% also have non-farm occupation
- 63% of youth engaged in farming report that their current agricultural income cannot support their families

<sup>6</sup> Sunam et al. (2021) defines this return as a “non-commodified subsistence guarantee” - a rural fallback system in which farming is not only an economic activity but also a cultural and familial obligation.

## Financing

- 92% rely on family members for financial support
- 80% have never taken a loan

Nearly all youth, regardless of program participation, continue to rely heavily on family financial support, even those active in income-generating work. Interestingly, many youths refer to a need for “funds” or “capital” rather than “loans” or “credit,” which may suggest a gap in youth understanding of or trust in formal financial services. This gap indicates a need for financial education, structural support and inclusive financing that align with youth livelihood strategies—especially for non-AGREE youth, who show lower confidence in managing finances and less exposure to cooperative or savings models.

Just over 25% of AGREE youth report ever having taken a loan. This corroborates other studies<sup>7</sup> which observe that Lao small-scale agripreneurs often prefer borrowing from farmers’ group or village funds, and distrust formal credit, wishing to avoid what they see as opaque bureaucracy. Young people’s decisions to re-enter, remain in, or exit agriculture are directly influenced by how economically viable the sector appears, and whether they can access the resources needed to establish or sustain their activity.

## Agricultural practices and market access

### Focus on food security and duties

A large majority of those interviewed work in subsistence farming. Eighty-seven percent of youth participation in agriculture is centered on production, often focused on food security and traditional duties, rather than income generation. There are relatively few opportunities to make money through these activities. Most surveyed youth are engaged in subsistence farming, with limited involvement in processing or marketing, particularly non-AGREE youth. Fewer women (36%) than men (59%) reported feeling capable of value addition, which may reflect time constraints, unequal training access, and prevailing gender norms.



*An AGREE youth in Huaphanh province expanded his fish farming into a restaurant, transforming his production on site to add value.*

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Thephavanh M, Philp JNM, Nuberg I, Denton M, Larson S, 2023. Perceptions of the Institutional and Support Environment amongst Young Agricultural Entrepreneurs in Laos. SUSTAINABILITY, 15 (5). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15054219>

Although AGREE youth report greater diversification, and multiple agricultural activities, they are still largely subsistence focused. Product diversification is common, most likely as a survival strategy rather than an entrepreneurial plan to expand. They understand that market price fluctuations, crop failure, and labor issues can quickly destabilize single-crop households.

- 88% have parents active in agriculture
- 59% have never received technical or agribusiness training
- 68% manage their own small plots or livestock activities
- 61% produce mainly for household consumption or selling surplus
- 46% grow between 3 and 5 products
- 41% lack understanding of value addition or post-harvest processing
- 41% rely exclusively on local markets to sell their products

### **Gender disparity**

While most survey results do not differ significantly between genders<sup>8</sup>, land access is a notable exception. Sixty-two percent of surveyed youth farm on family land while 29% own land outright. Of this 29% subset, 62% are men, and 38% are women. Women are overrepresented in the category of those with little or no knowledge about the size or status of the land they use. While fewer women than men own land, women's land ownership rate is still higher than in some other parts of the world. This may reflect gendered inheritance norms found in some of these matrilineal ethnic communities. Land is often passed to women, though this is influenced by household composition, land availability, migration, and other social or environmental conditions. Land access alone does not guarantee productivity: in focus group discussions, many reported being unable to work their land productively due to a lack of funds for equipment or agricultural inputs.

### **Support systems and networks**

Youth interviewed are interested in collaborative organizations. Findings show that while only 33% of youth are members of agricultural cooperatives or producers' groups, interest in participating is strikingly high, with 88% expressing willingness to join. Barriers such as lack of awareness, limited access to networks, and complex administrative procedures were commonly cited, especially among non-AGREE youth. AGREE youth report higher membership (40%) compared to non-AGREE (28%), likely due to institutional exposure, mentoring, and market linkages facilitated through the program.

Cooperatives are important for knowledge-sharing, equipment loan, reducing isolation in markets, and bargaining power. Resilient livelihood strategies rely not only on individual capacities, but also on social capital, with peer networks playing a critical role<sup>9</sup>. Without organized support structures, and with families and communities that are disconnected, many young people lack the ability to engage in markets and access meaningful support systems.

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<sup>8</sup> The results were indeed disaggregated by gender.

<sup>9</sup> Banerjee SB, Jackson L, 2017. Microfinance and the business of poverty reduction: Critical perspectives from rural Bangladesh. *Human Relations*, 70 (1), 63–91. Accessed on 6.08.2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726716640865>

## Agricultural knowledge and information sources

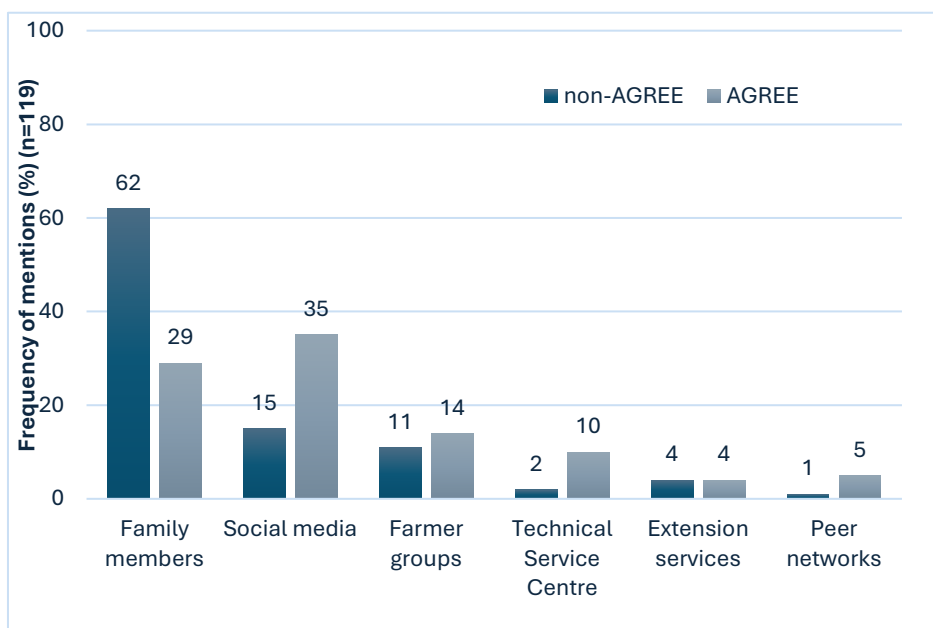
While some young respondents are looking online or learning about agriculture from farmer groups, most are learning from their families. Families remain the main source of agricultural knowledge (46%), followed by social media (21%) and farmer groups (13%). A few cited formal extension services (4%) and technical services centers (6%).

One interesting finding from the focus group research is that some parents are willing to observe and even emulate what youth learn and apply. Some elder farmers recognize that these new methods might lead to better outcomes, even if there's an element of risk in trying them.

AGREE participants are more engaged with technical service centers (TCS) and digital platforms (30% AGREE compared to 12% of non-AGREE), linking them both to broader information sources and potential

***“When it comes to the problems of young people, they are doing a little better now. Why is it good? Because communication is different now than before. We look on the internet and understand and learn for ourselves”.*** A parent participant in a focus group in Oudomxai province

buyers. These alternative networks enable youth to build connections, share experiences, and access support beyond the household. In a strongly family-oriented society, such networks can be particularly valuable in expanding youth autonomy and enabling independent decision-making.



### How respondents get their agriculture knowledge

- 46% rely on family
- 21% through social media
- 13% through farmer groups
- 4% through formal extension services
- 6% through technical services centres

Frequency with which respondents from each topic cited various sources of agricultural knowledge

Technical training (28%) and career guidance (24%) are the main areas of agricultural information sought. However, youth report that their greatest knowledge needs are market, financial, and business development (52%), as well as post-harvest management and value addition (21%). Despite growing interest in the topic, actual engagement in value addition remains limited, particularly among non-AGREE youth interviewed.

## Structural challenges

In addition to information-based constraints, infrastructure barriers emerged. Improved roads, irrigation systems, and transportation are among the most frequently cited infrastructural needs, while capital shortages, environmental shocks, and limited technical assistance dominate the list of everyday challenges.

Low connectivity and inadequate facilities raise input costs and lower product prices, discouraging youth from engaging in value-added activities. This not only limits material outcomes but also information access, contributing to unequal participation and weaker youth agency within the market system. Youth face systemic information gaps, lack bargaining power, and have little access to structured or premium markets. In areas with poor infrastructure, public services like extension or agricultural support are less frequent, leaving youth isolated and disconnected from development processes. This isolation narrows opportunities for rural youth and deeply influences how they envision their futures and livelihood options.

***“I don’t have the skills to prevent disease, and do not have a market for a large amount of my production. The price of the goods is often determined to be a low price by middlemen.”***

*A youth participant to the AGREE intervention*

## Seeing opportunities

A majority of youth interviewed see farming as both a viable livelihood and source of personal identity. Income was not the only motivation for wanting to farm. Respondents indicate that their aspirations and perceived opportunities are shaped by a combination of their current livelihood environment, and considerations such as family dynamics and social norms. Their views are fluid and evolving. While some youth see agriculture as a fallback, others view it as a path to autonomy and innovation. These perceptions may lead to fluid mobility across agricultural activities, the rural economy, and further exploration of other sectors. This complexity necessitates understanding their perceptions as both personal and structural constructs, influenced by social and cultural norms, the current livelihood environment, and their personal aspirations.

While 55% of respondents feel that agriculture offers opportunities for youth, most respondents’ primary motivation for wanting to farm transcends purely financial considerations. An open-ended survey question reveals that many view agriculture not only as a livelihood but also a key element of their identity. This motivation (40%) is the strongest driver of perceiving opportunity in agriculture, followed by access to land (20%), potential income generation (12%), and family or project support (12%).

***“What I like about farming is that it makes me feel good. I have time to spend with my family, care for my parents, and own a business”.***

*AGREE participant*

## Needs

While youth interviewed are keen to improve their skills, they are not sure what they most need or how to acquire this knowledge. Most respondents identify financial support as their primary need for supporting their work (25%). Notably, 18% of non-AGREE youth highlight financial assistance as the only support

they need. Other commonly mentioned forms of support include business and marketing skills (18%), counseling programs (18%), and new business opportunities (14%).

Youth express strong interest in acquiring additional skills, particularly in value addition, market literacy, and the use of agricultural technologies. However, a disconnect remains between these aspirations and the pathways youth identify to achieve them. While many aspire to “successful careers”, few explicitly connect these goals to acquiring specific skills needed for particular activities. Rather than pinpoint exact skills they need to acquire, rural youth tend to articulate their needs in terms of more general support (e.g., funds) or aspirations (e.g., successful careers).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

Lao youth are not turning away from agriculture out of disinterest but out of necessity. They seek sustainable and profitable futures in conditions often beyond their control. The findings from this study show that youth programs like AGREE can provide valuable skills and confidence but must be supported by broader rural reforms that address structural inequities, infrastructure deficits, and market failures.

**The “youth question” in Lao is ultimately not a problem of motivation but of enablement.** Unlocking the potential of young farmers means transforming systems so that their opportunity space, rooted in family, land, and community, can evolve into viable livelihoods. Additionally, collective support systems like youth-friendly cooperatives, networks, peer-learning groups, accessible extension and dedicated digital sharing platforms may be useful in mitigating some of the challenges identified.

### Recommendations towards an inclusive support system

1. Lower the entry barriers, both administrative and social, for youth focused interventions in agriculture.
2. Livelihood models that allow youth to combine part-time agriculture with other incomes streams or social roles might align better with their realities.
3. Access to information and agriculture extension services is key. Facilitate targeted trainings (in person and online) to increase their resilience to climate and environmental shocks such as drought, floods, pests and diseases.
4. Support financial, market and policy literacy training and coaching to increase management capacities, market access, and understanding customer needs.
5. Develop youth-friendly cooperatives, peer networks and digital platforms to bridge information and extension gaps, and to build connection that can foster mentorship and support access to markets. AGREE participants and alumni are connected on social media and benefit from peer-to-peer support and information-sharing.