
Motivations and Achievements for Mid-career Change into Farming Occupation

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Abstract Withdrawal of people from rural agricultural sector to take up non-farm employment has been a common phenomenon statistically and visually. The present article, however, deals with an antithetical occurrence of people previously employed in non-farm occupation but now turning to work on farm. It is based on the first author's research in qualitative approach for her dissertation writing. In-depth information was collected from 12 "recently turned farmers". Apparently, there are both push and pull factors underlying individual's motivations to make mid-career change namely the problems or limitations in previous job and the positive expectation about farming profession. Specifically, salary persons have to endure work-related stress like that from fixed working hours and schedule which allow them no freedom to spend time as they needed for themselves or family. Meanwhile, farming occupation is believed to allow one to his boss in terms of decision making and management of time, get closer with family for better relationship, realize food and income security, and live in a non-polluted environment. All these would give one and his family a sound psychological as well as physical health. Thus the most common farming system adopted has been organic agriculture including vegetable, rice, fruit tree, and livestock production. The 12 representatives of recently turned farmers indicated the most crucial factor for success in their new occupation was their ability to acquire good farming knowledge and so far they have achieved a better quality of life as manifested by the improvement in family health and economic conditions as well as their self-reliant capacity particularly from minimization of food and production input costs. To make farming occupation more appealing and successful for those newcomers into agricultural sector, it is recommended that knowledge exchange group be formed among the recently turned farmers and particularly relevant agricultural extension workers arrange activities for the exchange of knowledge, experience, and information about local resources like water for farm irrigation between the long time farmers and those new ones in a specific community area.

Keywords: Motivation, Occupation, mid career change, Sustainable agricultural system

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Introduction

Farming has long been the occupation of the majority of Thai population. However, just like other developing countries, substantial part of Thai agricultural labor force has continued to seek employment in non-farm sectors. Furthermore, higher level of people's literacy and the growth of industrial and services sectors as the results of various national economic and social development plans have encouraged greater labor mobility to non-farm employment, causing a continuing decline of agricultural share in the national labor force. The recent Labor Force Survey undertaken by the National Statistical Office of Thailand (2015) revealed that the share of employed persons in 15 -24 year-old age group (adolescence) in agricultural sector declined significantly over 20 years period from 35.3 % in 1987 to 12.1 % in 2011. The number of persons aged 25 – 39 employed in agricultural sector increased constantly but at low rate during 1987 – 1997 and then declined continually to 28.7 % share in 2011. Meanwhile, employed persons aged 40 – 59 in agriculture increased remarkably from 25.7 % share of labor force in this age group in 1987 to 46.3 % in 2011. Similarly, the share of the employed elderly (above 60 year-old) in agriculture increased almost three times from 4.4 % in 1987 to 12.8 % in 2011. The above statistics clearly demonstrates the rising trend of Thai people in younger generations to get non-farm employment leaving fewer and fewer of them to work in agriculture, and the presence of virtually older and aging farmers in rural areas. If such tendencies persist in the absence of corrective measures, Thai agriculture will have to rely on migrant workers in the near future.

However, there emerges an antithetical phenomenon in which people previously employed in such well respected and economically secured professions as government worker, civil servant, and private business employee shifted in their mid-career path to work in farming under sustainable agricultural systems. With a research interest to learn what are the motivations behind this kind of labor mobility and what are the farming features of the newly turned farmers, the present investigator was able to locate 12 individuals who made such career change decision to respond to these research enquiries. The findings from this investigation will form the basis for developing guidelines and measures to motivate young and able Thai people to take up agriculture as a career and to replace the presently aging and retiring farmers. The study results should be particularly useful for agricultural extension agencies and workers to design and implement programs to assist the newly turned farmers to pursue technically appropriate agricultural practices and achieve their professional success as well as their goals of life. It is also believed that the contents in this study will be informative for those remain

reluctant to move into agricultural domain especially from the account given on the experience of the newly turned farmers from the stage of their decision making process to their establishment of sustainable agricultural systems.

Objectives: To identify the motivations behind mid-career individual's choice to change from non-farm to farming occupation base on sustainable agricultural system.

Materials and methods

The research methodology was a qualitative research using case study method to assure in-depth information for understanding the motivations of individuals who made mid career from non-farm works into sustainable agricultural venture. As there exist no record nor statistics regarding persons who have made mid-career change, the difficult-to-reach and hidden samples for this investigation have to be identified by firstly setting the sampling frame to cover population of farmers practicing sustainable agricultural production systems, secondly drawing the samples using snowball technique of non-probability sampling method, and finally screening for the information-rich cases as key informants relevant for answering the research objectives. In the snowball sampling process, initial informants are to be located from the two-year back published and reported sources and they will be asked to nominate other persons they know to have changed from other occupations to take up sustainable agricultural pursuits. All potential samples from the chain-referral actions will be screened to get a total of 12 samples for in-depth interview for the needed information for the study which will be analyzed and presented descriptively.

Scope of the study

The research focuses are on the motivating factors for individuals to make career change from non-farm works to farming in sustainable agricultural systems. The field work for information gathering is to take place during August 2014 – August 2015.

Results

General background of the newly turned farmers, The 12 newly turned farmers are located in Chiang Mai Province. Their educational attainment is at least the graduation from high vocational college and the highest is master's degree as shown in Table 1. After their graduation from college or university, they all got non-farm jobs in their line of education as civil servant, government

worker, or private business employee with secured terms of employment and regular salary or wage and workplace in large city or urban area like Bangkok and Chiang Mai where some of them had to rent accommodation and spend some length of time and some expense to commute to work. Apart from pressure at workplace and from urban environment, they felt dispirited from the situations that they had to get up early to reach office/workplace in time, had meager time left for being with and taking care of family members as well as for leisure, and some even could not make ends meet from the employment. These stress and situations caused them to make a pause at the ‘turning point’, for a review on their own needs and desires regarding career and personal life before deciding to leave the existing job to enter alternative profession which seemed more suitable for individual case.

Most of these newly turned farmers were brought up in rural area and in farming household but their parents or grandparents wished not to have them work on farm when they grow up as farm works are quite onerous and thus supported them to get high education to get jobs in government, business, services, or industrial sectors after graduation. They thus ended up studying college and working in non-farm sector as they were expected by their parents and older folks without knowing what they really wanted to be and to do. As time went and work as well as urban environment related pressure arose, they decided to move back to the farming environment. Such ‘backward labor mobility’ was often considered by their parents as an act destroying the latter’s expectation and by their rural community circle as “crazy” or “weir” behavior. Some recently turned farmers received derisive hearsays that they returned to their rural motherland due to their career failure or problems in family relationship.

Table 1. Motivations for mid-career change of farmers under study

Item	Gender	Age	Education Level	Previous Occupation/ Job	Motivations choosing agriculture career choice	for Agriculture as Production	Marketaable Products	Factors contributing to career success in agriculture
Farmer A	Female	50	Bachelor degree	Private company worker	-Time related matters -Work related stres -Family relationship	-Organic rice -Organic vegetables -Livestock raising	-Packed milled rice	-Production input -Knowledge in agricultural profession -Happiness
Farmer B	Male	43	High vocational certificate	Photographer	-Time related matters -Family relationship -Food safety -Work environment	-Organic vegetables -Organic rice -Organic fruits	-Hearbal soap -Coffee -Tea -Packed milled rice	-Production input -Happiness -Knowledge in agricultural profession

Farmer C	Male	32	Master degree	Lecturer	-Time related matters -Work environment -Work related stress	-Organic rice -Organic fruits -Livestock raising -Organic vegetables	-Creamed soap for skin nurishment -Bottled honey -Packed milled rice -Coffee	-Happiness -Production input -Income
Farmer D	Female	46	Bachelor degree	Government Employee	-Food safety -Time related matters -Family relationship	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits -Livestock raising	-Chiangda (Gymnema inodurum decne) herbal tea -Organic vegetables -Sun dried fruits	-Income -Happiness -Health
Farmer E	Female	54	Bachelor degree	Private company worker	-Work related stress -Food safety -Time related matters -Work environment	-Organic rice -Organic vegetables -Livestock raising	-Packed milled rice -Organic vegetables -Organic fruits	-Happiness -Health -Production input
Farmer F	Male	30	High vocational certificate	Private company worker	-income -Family relationship	-Organic rice -Organic vegetables -Organic fruits	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits	-Income -Health -Happiness -Production input
Farmer G	Male	44	Master degree	Pastors	-Family relationship -Food safety	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits -Livestock raising	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits	-Happiness -Health
Farmer H	Female	64	Master degree	Teacher	-Time related matters -Food safety -Work related stress -Work environment	-Organic rice -Organic vegetables -Organic fruits -Livestock raising	-Packed milled rice -Organic fruits -Organic vegetables	-Happiness -Production input -Knowledge in agricultural profession
Farmer I	Female	33	Vocational certificate	Private company worker	-Time-related matters -Food safety -Family relationship	Organic vegetables Organic fruits	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits -Coffee	-Happiness -Health -Income
Farmer J	Male	35	Bachelor degree	Chemist/ Businessman	-Family relationship -Time related matters -Food safety	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits -Livestock raising	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits	-Happiness -Income -Knowledge in agricultural profession
Farmer K	Female	44	Bachelor degree	NGO	-Family relationship -Food safety	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits -Livestock raising	-Organic vegetables -Organic fruits	-Knowledge in agricultural profession -Happiness -Income
Farmer L	Female	40	High vocational certificate	Babysitter	-Family relationship -Food safety	-Organic vegetables	-Organic vegetables	-Production input -Health

Discussion

Motivations for choosing agriculture as career choice

The present investigation found five important reasons motivating individuals previously employed in non-farm occupations to take up agriculture as career choice.

Time-related matters. Farming is a self-employed venture and respected for honesty and ethical standard. Farmer is his own boss able to allocate and manage his time for work and rest at his own will and judgment, and thus enjoys the feeling of having freedom and leisure. As the owner and operator of a farming enterprise, he uses his own mind and thought in making decision and plan for his farming operation which helps everything go smoothly and quickly.

Food safety and food security for family members and health and economic consequences. The sustainable agricultural systems adopted by the recently turned farmers generally involve minimum or no usage of agrochemicals. The farming household thus becomes self-reliant in getting both safe food and food security for subsistence consumption which leads to an improved physical health as well as better psychological health for all family members due to no or little agro-chemical contaminations. Economically, it becomes better-off with some household savings as the results of reduced food consumption expenses, minimum or no purchase of agro-chemical inputs, and selling output surpluses.

Family relationships. Compared with the previous life-style of a salary/wage earner in urban setting, any recently turned farmer now becomes able to manage and spend more time for taking care more closely of his family members including the aging parents or grandparents, and children especially those in young age who need warm and close relationship with their parents. In addition to the general getting together at various family activities, life as a farmer allows him to involve older household members and his children in different farming activities as appropriate which helps strengthen both knowledge exchange and family tie.

Work environment. Farming involves largely outdoor activities and rustic atmosphere which give a tranquil feeling, despite the onerous tasks, for the recently turned farmer who used to go through various hectic, confused, and chaotic conditions in urban job and life. Some farmers believed that the change into working heavily in open air would actually improve their health physically and mentally. Some were also convinced that the pastoral simplicity would make them feel more content with whatever they have, and less pressured by the trend in consumerism and social competition which once caused them extravagant spending.

Work-related stress. At institutional or formalized workplace, employees particularly at subordinate level often get stressed from strict rules and regulations such as those regarding work performance and in-out time, expectations of supervisors/higher authorities, and perhaps conflicts and competition with colleagues. With the stress from and the boring of such workplace situations, some non-farm urban/industrial workers considered to change their career into farming, expecting that they would have more freedom in planning their own business, managing their time, and making decision.

Factors/conditions contributing to career success in agriculture

There are a number of factors/conditions helping the 12 recently turned farmers in carrying out their farming operation satisfactorily and successfully.

Happiness. An interesting condition most recently turned farmers indicated to be a key factor fostering their success in agricultural career is the more “happiness” in their daily life. This is because they now are able to spend more time with family, have more time for private interests and pleasure, consume safe and good quality food at low home production cost, live in a good environmental condition, reside in a friendly community where members still adhere to the traditional reciprocal relationship such as by sharing food and participating in others’ merit making and house warming ceremonies which make them have a sense of belonging to the local community. In essence, all farmers under study expressed that they felt highly content with their life as farmers in sustainable agricultural systems.

Production inputs. A number of recently turned farmers work on ancestral farmland they now inherit sizable enough for agricultural production but some had to begin with renting land before buying land for their own. There is no problem about labor input as most farms use household labor. Meanwhile, other yield enhancing inputs like fertilizer and pest-control agent are generally not bought from market or external sources but produced on farm or obtained naturally such as compost, bio-fermented liquid fertilizer/pesticides, and natural enemies for pest control. Therefore, generally the recently turned farmers make relatively small cash investment on production inputs.

Knowledge in agricultural profession. The knowledge for the present farming operation came from four sources. First is the previous professional skills and experience including agricultural educational background which are applied or adapted for the present farming circumstances. Second is knowledge from self-study through observation, trial, reading textbooks and technical documents, and from various mass media like radio, television, and on-line information. Third is the learning from resource persons and various training

sessions prior to mid-career change decision and this way of learning remains even after the career change as most recently turned farmers still keep contact with various resource persons who willingly continue to serve as their “mentors”. Fourth is the learning from informal knowledge and experience exchange among the recently turned farmers through such means as facebook or line group formation. However, so far no formal knowledge exchange group or network has been established.

Health. After moving back to rural area and undertaking sustainable agricultural systems, the recently turned farmers and family members enjoyed a good health status in all aspects, physically, mentally, and socially. They now become self-reliant in safe and nutrient-adequate food supply for household consumption, can avoid chemical contamination and pollution, and have no social or family problems. Thus the farming activities can proceed without any disruption from illness of labor or decision maker.

Income. The recently turned farmers reported they now could make enough income for a sound family livelihood. In money term, they could earn more or less the same income level as from the previous employment. However, presently they got an income in-kind from consuming what they produced and the money income from selling the surpluses. Therefore in real term, they could generate greater savings from spending less for buying food and some even to the point of paying off all household debts especially thanks to the farming activities after the sufficiency economy philosophy.

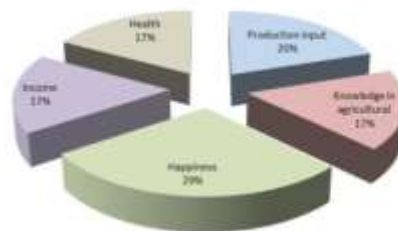


Figure 1. Factors/conditions contributing to career success in agriculture
Agricultural production features

Typically, the recently turned farmers have adopted sustainable agricultural systems embracing the components as described below.

Organic vegetable and herbal plant production. There are diverse varieties of vegetable and herbal plant grown as primary objective for home consumption including lemon grass, ginger, galangal, Chinese cabbage, morning glory, chili pepper, yard long bean, tomato, gac fruit, kitchen mint, cork wood for edible flower (dok cae), salad green, gymnema inodudrum (pak

chiangda), kaffir lime, exotic mint, climbing wattle (pak cha-om), coriander, carrot, soy bean, peanut, and other native vegetables. The output surpluses are sold to market in various marketing methods to make daily household income such as retail selling to local community's fresh food market, selling at one's own grocery shop, packing in bag or other forms of container for supplying to super-markets, and marketing management through Community Supported Agriculture channel. Some output surpluses have been processed into a variety of products such as chiangda herbal tea, packaged dried chilli, aromatic herb in sachet, gac fruit soap and skin cream, and rice germ soap.



Figure 2. Mixed cropping of vegetables and herbal plants, and processed products.

Organic fruit tree cultivation. The commonly cultivated are longan, lychee, mango, Cavendish banana, sugar banana of nam wa variety, star gooseberry, grape, guava, rose apple, coconut, coffee, pomelo, water melon, and lime as the farmers knew that Chiang Mai has been famous for producing good quality temperate and sub-tropical fruits as well as vegetables due to its favorable and suitable climatic conditions. Fruit tree cultivation pattern is generally arranged for optimizing the symbiosis among various tree species as well as that between plant and animal species. Farmers thus can earn seasonal income from different fruit trees.



Figure 3. Cultivation of fruit trees to increase household income.

Organic rice production. Organic rice has been produced for home consumption and the surplus is usually processed into milled rice then vacuum-packed and labeled a house brand in an attractive fashion. Apparently, the recently turned farmers have greater and wider knowledge as well as expertise in using modern technology for information searching and for marketing in comparison with rice farmers in general who simply grow rice for selling to millers or middle agents. Particularly, they strategically sell their packaged or packed organic rice through numerous channels including website, grocery store, product stall at various hospitals, health food shop, and such social media network as facebook. Their target customers are those health conscious persons. The facts that they can set the selling price for organic rice they market themselves higher than the price given by millers and that their production cost is relatively low due to the use of household productive inputs, they can realize a favorable return to their organic rice enterprise.



Figure 4. Packaged organic rice for selling to health conscious persons as target customers.

Animal farming. This includes apiculture, wild boar raising, swine production in green piggery system, laying hens raising for egg production, bull frog as well as fresh water fish farming. The animal enterprise of the recently turned farmers are usually planned for optimizing the positive or symbiosis relationship and permitting the co-habitation among various agricultural components in a given environment like bee-keeping activity in longan area where bees provide the pollination services for longan flowers on which they in turn depend for honey production. Farmers can earn income from honey, other bee products, and various processed products containing honey as an ingredient for health purpose and cosmetic use. Likewise, pig raising in green piggery system not only prevents odor pollution but also provide excrete and defecate for use as a raw material for producing organic fertilizer or compost to save the cost for production input.



Figure 5. Animal farming in symbiosis relationship between plant and animal on farm to reduce production cost and increase income.

Discussion

The observation that some persons already securely employed in non-farm occupation have shifted into farming amidst the normal rising trend of rural-to-urban labor mobility prompted the present research inquiry into what are the motivations for the recently turned farmers to make such mid-career change and what are their farming features in sustainable agricultural systems. The investigation revealed there were five main reasons that motivated the persons previously employed in non-farm occupations to take up agriculture as career choice including time-related matters, concern for food safety, family relationships, work environment, and work-related stress. The expectation was that all the five conditions would be different or better in the rural farming environment. After fully engaging in self-employed farming occupation, the farmers under study were of opinion that a number of factors/conditions had

helped them carry out their farming operation satisfactorily and successfully namely access to production inputs, the knowledge in agricultural profession, steady income, good health status, ability to gain relevant knowledge, and especially happiness. Their true happiness is no longer derived fundamentally from the high income or high career position but is now coming from such subjectivities as being one's own boss, freedom of ideas and actions, more time for family and warmer family relationship, socialization with other community members and sense of belonging to local community, living in a rustic natural environment, consumption of home-produced safe food with year-round food security, good health from eating clean food and using no or little agro-chemicals in farming, earning adequate household income, ability to make savings, and the feeling that it is possible to pass on the farming profession and farm assets to their children. The recently turned farmers generally adopted organic farming of rice, vegetables and herbal plants, fruit trees, and animals under sustainable agricultural systems. They have changed their mind and way of life away from consumerism and materialism as well as income maximization oriented natures toward self-reliance and sufficiency economy. They now attempt to cut down food expenditure, lessen the extent of buying production inputs from market, and make regular income from selling output surpluses or processed farm products. Although output and income appear quite low at the early stage of farming enterprise establishment especially those from perennial fruit trees, they feel content with their achievements considering they get compensation in terms of good health and improved soil fertility in their farmland in the long run. Thus, it can be concluded that agriculture which has been negatively perceived is actually quite an attractive profession in the present social environment.

It is also found that although the recently turned farmers have limited background in agriculture, they are able to apply their previous professional knowledge, skills, and experience in the present farming operation. They have further acquired relevant knowledge and information from various sources for farm experimentation, marketing management, and processing of farm products. In the latter area which is an outstanding achievement, they have demonstrated to have admirably creative idea in processing and presenting their farm products in the forms interested and demanded by the present consumer market for natural products. However in the early stage of farming operation establishment and development, these recently turned farmers had to depend largely on themselves in a seemingly "isolated" relationship with other farmers and official extension workers. Their self-reliant hard works and enormous efforts which resulted in their success became visible to the eyes of their neighbors and other farmers, making the latter come more and more to seek

knowledge from them. To facilitate and enhance the knowledge exchange and amicable relationship between the recently turned farmers and those long time established ones, local agricultural extension office or relevant community development agencies should arrange to have extension or development workers play a catalytic role in combining the outstanding features of conventional farming practices and what have done by the recently turned farmers into different farming elements, for example the integration of local wisdom into modern farm management and *vice versa*. Extension workers should keep a close contact with farmers to help solving the latter's problems and in response to their needs while following up the program implementation for occupational development and keeping the responsibilities in the extension function.

Recommendations

1. For the recently turned farmers.

- The recently turned farmers should form knowledge and experience exchange group among themselves and/or with those long-time established ones in the local community for mutual benefits in such areas as outlets for farm output, and processing of farm products.

- Agricultural undertakings involve a multitude of onerous tasks and need patience which might cause some recently turned farmers to become discouraged and even withdraw themselves pre-maturely from farming. It is thus imperative to build one's will power and seek some things for spiritual attachment namely through applying sufficiency economy philosophy and from the support and encouragement of family members.

- It is crucial to acquire up-to-date knowledge and information continually to help improve farming and management skills, deal with various production and marketing problems, and keep pace with technological and market dynamics.

2. For relevant agricultural extension workers in public and private sectors.

- Provision of supports, guidance, knowledge, information, and consultation services for the recently turned farmers, as well as arrangement of follow up activities to ensure their progress.

- Implementation of a management system with networking approach to facilitate and foster the knowledge and experience exchange as well as suitable local resource sharing particularly water for farm irrigation between the recently turned farmers and the traditional local farmers. This should be able to

help foster the overall agricultural development and minimize various potential conflicts in the local community.

- Development of guidelines or policies to enlarge the market for organic produce and products from sustainable agricultural systems probably beginning with the development of local or community market and subsequently the granting of food safety certificate to assure consumers the quality and standards of the produce and products.

3. For future researches.

The possibility or potential for tripartite cooperation among agricultural extension agency, the recently turned farmers, and the traditional local farmers to combine and apply knowledge, technology, skills, ideas and concepts from different parties into new versions of farming practice, management, technology, product, etc. for common interest, benefits and advancement.

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