



Women farmers in Don Yieng apply organic fertiliser to their organic soyabean crop. Photo: Rebecca Eisses

# Organic farming and gender roles in Northern Thailand

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High external input agriculture was first introduced to Thailand on a large scale under the First National Economic and Social Development Plan, which was developed under the auspices of the World Bank in 1961. Modern agricultural equipment, inputs and concepts were spread throughout the country by the newly established Department of Agricultural Extension and Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives. The Plan emphasised high yielding varieties of exportable cash crops to improve the national economy.

## Small farmers, the green revolution and the global economy

The introduction of high external-input agriculture into Thailand has, for some crops, increased yields and reduced labour requirements and has allowed the production of certain non-indigenous crops that might otherwise be too difficult to grow. High external-input agriculture has not, however, generally improved quality of life for small farmers in Thailand. The purchase of external inputs can trap farmers into a debt cycle that is almost impossible for them to escape. The use of pesticides further leads to noticeable deterioration in farmers' health as well as that of the agro-ecosystem. In some cases, farmers who have been improperly trained in the use of pesticides, combined with an ineffective regulatory system, also put the health of consumers at risk.

More than these physical effects, the entry of Thailand's small farmers into the global economy has completely revolutionised the countryside. Farmers who were once largely self-sufficient and owners of their own time and resources now adhere to the adage "time is money". If the time and labour they once spent weeding their crop has now been reduced by herbicide use, for example, they must now use that time in an economically efficient

manner. This is necessary mainly to earn cash to service their (usually) unsustainable debt. This change in the village economy has had particular implications for women's agricultural roles in many communities.

Under the new economy, there are two main ways in which women's roles have been marginalised. In areas far from an urban centre or with little seasonal labour demand, the introduction of labour-saving technology such as pesticides and chemical fertilisers (especially herbicides) has meant that women's role in crop production is now reduced to planting and harvesting. This often means that women have more time to devote to reproductive work and women themselves consider their situation improved. However, since in most Northern Thai households women are responsible for a significant proportion of productive work, in some cases women will find productive work elsewhere, such as factory work or day labour on other peoples' farms, or else the men will find a permanent job off-farm, leaving their wives solely responsible for agricultural production (although perhaps not in control of it). In areas close to an urban centre with a demand for seasonal labour, men leave the village, usually after planting the dry season crop, and return in time to help with the harvest. This is often done in order to earn cash to finance the inputs needed for the dry-season crop production.

## Organic production – an alternative?

The Chomrom Phupholid Kaset Insee Jangwad Chiang Mai or the Chiang Mai Organic Producers Association (COPA) consists of farmers who are committed to using organic production methods to ensure environmental sustainability and to protect their own health and the health of consumers. In addition, they make their own inputs such as compost, bio-extract and botanical pesticides from locally available materials found in the forest, on their farms, or in their communities in order to reduce costs and increase self-reliance. The COPA works with consumer groups and has set up

alternative markets in the city of Chiang Mai to sell members' produce at a fair price.

In order to become a member of the COPA, a village group must pass through a series of four trainings: sustainable agriculture concepts, sustainable agriculture techniques, a study tour, and finally a session on gender roles. In the COPA's experience, adoption of organic farming significantly increases labour requirements compared to conventional farming. Women often shoulder the increased labour to a greater degree than men. The gender session serves to sensitise men to the importance of reproductive tasks and the time women need to spend doing them. In most sessions, the men are quite surprised to see how much time it actually takes to prepare meals, wash clothes, care for elders and children and the other "invisible" tasks that women perform every day. Some families choose not to join their village organic farming group because the men are unwilling to help with the reproductive work, but many remain convinced of the value of organic farming and choose to divide productive and reproductive work within the household more equitably.

Women's importance in the COPA is expressed in their participation in both traditional and non-traditional roles. For example, the traditional role of women as marketers of farm produce is largely restored through the COPA's revolving markets, a role that was superseded by men with the introduction of cash crops sold to middlemen. All members of the revolving market, of whom 57 out of 60 are women, meet every month to set prices for their produce, thus avoiding competition between members on the basis of price. Women also add value to organic produce through processing, making and selling both traditional Northern Thai products such as *khao khaeb* made from rice flour and non-traditional products such as strawberry jam. Female members of the COPA serve as trainers and spokespeople, as well as in



Organic vegetables produced by COPA members. Photo: ISAC

administrative posts. (So far, there has never been a female president of the COPA but the present vice-president is female and some of the member village groups have female presidents.)

### The socio-economic benefits of organic agriculture

A study on dry-season soybean production by the Don Jieng Organic Farmers Group, a member of the COPA, provides a concrete example of some interesting socio-economic benefits derived from organic farming. Most men in Don Jieng do seasonal construction work in the city of Chiang Mai after planting the dry season soybean crop in late December of each year. They return in mid-April for the Thai New Year festival and soybean harvest. In the meantime, women are responsible for pesticide and chemical fertiliser application to the soybean crop,

usually consisting of one or two herbicide sprays, one or two insecticide sprays, and one broadcast application of chemical fertiliser. In addition, the women become solely responsible for the care of elders, children, and livestock, as well as their regular household activities. The men who work in the city earn the cash they need to pay for the inputs for their soybean crop, to service debt and to pay for other things requiring cash such as school fees. However, since they need to rent accommodation and pay for food, they often do not return with a significant amount of money. (Indeed, due to the informal nature of the work contracts, sometimes they are not paid at all). Labour migration has also been a mode of spreading HIV/AIDS from the city to rural areas. Out of a total village population of approximately 500 people, more than 20 people in Don Jieng have died of AIDS (this figure is, of course, hardly comparable to the situation in many African countries and is in fact lower than the regional average rate of infection, but is still a significant amount for a rural village).

Members of the Don Jieng Organic Farmers Group who were growing their dry season soybeans organically did not have time to work in the city due to the increased labour requirements of their organic crop. At the same time, because their input costs were so low, it was not necessary for them to work in the city. Members of the group, especially women, felt that the social benefits of having the men stay in the village outweighed the lost opportunity to earn cash in the city. However, since the organic soybean crop was more profitable than the conventional soybean crop, due to a higher selling price, they were not at an economic disadvantage compared to the conventional farmers in the village. After a single year, membership of the Don Jieng Organic Farmers Group doubled, in part due to the socio-economic benefits of their organic soybean crop.

### Linking with others

The COPA is still only a small organisation comprised of a very small proportion of the farmers in Chiang Mai province. However, it is a member of the Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN), which links like-minded NGOs and peoples' organisations around Thailand to lobby for changes in government policy. The AAN was successful in having sustainable agriculture included in the 8<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan, an inclusion that has had implications for Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives research and extension. This also resulted in the Ministry committing funding to a Pilot Project to Develop Sustainable Agriculture for Small-Scale Farmers. Funds under this project are administered regionally by farmers' organisations, including the COPA.

Through its community radio program and co-operation with NGOs and GOs in farmer-to-farmer extension and advocacy for sustainable agriculture, the COPA and its members are known around the country and even internationally for their work. Women continue to play a role of ever-increasing importance in the COPA, both through the revival and celebration of traditional roles like food processing and marketing, and also through non-traditional roles such as training, administration and community politics.

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### References

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