

Reduced Labour for Lower Mekong Farming

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Issues Addressed:

To explore the impact of reduced labor for Lower Mekong farming, the conservation agriculture (CA) and farming systems (FS) approaches that may be used to address these challenges using Lao PDR and Cambodia as case studies, and consider the implications for other ecosystems.

Outcomes:

1. Key is “need to synthesize on-farm technologies via participatory approaches to quantify labor savings, ecosystem benefits and livelihood impacts, drawing from experiences in Thailand”.
2. Labor is critical as a driver for change via mechanization, any shift to more extensive and diverse agriculture, and also to more intensive and commercial agriculture. The Brazilian two-level farm model may appear as investment in plantations like rubber, teak or extensive cropping for export expands, while smallholders specialize to niche markets for secure returns.
3. For mechanization, a stepped approach may be most effective. For example, the two-wheel tractor with hydro-tiller may reduce labor and drudgery for land preparation for wet seeding. Any switch from broadcasting to row sowing then allows mechanical inter-row cultivation, reducing labor for hand-weeding. This allows use of tractor-pulled seeders, such as adopted in Thailand. Residue retention and no-till systems should follow as water management improves, under irrigated, supplementary and rainfed systems. Finally, experience increases to allow farmers to adopt direct dry-seeding, including strategies for weed control.
4. With less labor available, there is low incentive to invest further in rice, as the price is low and returns are not there. This should encourage farmers to diversify and invest in higher value crops, forages or livestock, improving livelihood while managing risk. This may also allow some specialization; some farmers may choose to grow rice well, others may prefer to invest more in a post-rice vegetable, pulse or forage, or perhaps chickens, pigs, goats or cattle.
5. Approaches to help farmers become familiar with and try technologies should also assist adoption, including participatory approaches, farmer training, demonstrations and landcare groups.

Burning Issue:

Need to synthesize on-farm technologies via participatory approaches to quantify system labor savings, ecosystem benefits and livelihood impacts, drawing from experiences in Thailand.

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