A policymaker's guide to understanding youth livelihood aspirations in Myanmar

Why understand youth aspirations for working in food systems?

Youth livelihoods and food systems are increasingly becoming the focus of development institutions and agendas amid growing concerns about the apparent increase in the out-migration of rural youth and the future of smallholder food production and global food security. This trend has brought the aspirations of rural youth into focus. Increasing access to formal education and connectivity to non-rural employment opportunities have suggested a "generational break"[1] in the aspirations of rural young people to engage with food systems for their livelihoods.

The International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and WorldFish conducted a study with young people from a fishing community in the Ayeyarwady Delta of Myanmar. The study sought to understand the livelihood aspirations of these young people and how they were connected to eventual livelihood realities.

Diverging youth aspirations and livelihood realities

In the water-rich Ayeyarwady Delta of Myanmar, fishing and wage labor have traditionally been the main sources of livelihoods available to landless households. Despite this centrality, small-scale fisheries have frequently been marginalized under national-level priorities, severely diminishing fish yields over time. Today, the fishing community includes some of the poorest and most socially excluded households in its village.

The youth from the fisher households were among the first generations to "come of age" during the past decade in Myanmar, marked by political transitions and rapid economic growth. These young people considered themselves as being part of a "non-rural" generation, to whom an increase in access to schooling and rural-urban mobilities were associated with the promise of new and expanded livelihood opportunities, and aspirations of new livelihood identities beyond those associated with poverty and social marginalization.

Easy access to these livelihood opportunities, however, remained limited for many of these young people due to the continuing influence of their socioeconomic status. Livelihood realities were also deeply gendered. Although temporary, the young women were able to find employment in the expanding garment sector around Yangon. Although urban employment had its own risks and challenges with an uncertain future, it was found to be less labor intensive and more prestigious when compared to the alternatives available in the village for females. While moving to Yangon also featured heavily in the aspirations of many of the male youth, their livelihood realities continued to remain rural, and increasingly in a neighboring ocean fishery that carried with it significant risk and danger.

A new approach

This study shows how any meaningful attempt to improve youth livelihoods within the fisheries sector in Myanmar must recognize the importance of small-scale fisheries to the poor or landless, and the intergenerational exclusions that continue to shape whether young people can build profitable and dignified livelihoods in this sector in the Ayeyarwady Delta.

The findings of this study highlight the need to be cautious when attempting to connect the "generational break" in the aspirations of young people with a straightforward disengagement from agrarian livelihoods. With aspirations of "non-rural" livelihoods, which were not readily realized, for many of these young people, any livelihood engagement, whether within rural food systems or out of them, was marked by a sense of temporariness, as they remained open to the possibility that new opportunities may emerge in the future that were more aligned with their desired futures. The findings align with an increasing number of studies that suggest that the livelihood engagements of young people today should be understood as being marked by a high degree of mobility between localities and sectors.

Notes

[1] Leavy J and Hossain N. 2014. Who wants to farm? Youth aspirations, opportunities and rising food prices. IDS Working Papers (Vol. 2014). doi: 10.1111/j.2040-0209.2014.00439.x

Acknowledgments

This is a contribution to the following:

Authors

Indika Arulingam, Deepa Joshi, Sanjiv de Silva, Sonali Senaratna-Sellamuttu and Moet Palal.

Affiliations

International Water Management Institute (IWMI)

Citation

This publication should be cited as: Arulingam I, Joshi D, de Silva S, Senaratna Sellamuttu S and Palal M. 2022. A policymaker's guide to understanding youth livelihood aspirations in Myanmar. Penang, Malaysia: WorldFish. Program Brief: WorldFish-2022-14.

For more information, please visit www.worldfishcenter.org