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Narrative Insights Reveal the Motivations of Young Agricultural Entrepreneurs in Laos

Manithaythip Thephavanh ^{1,2,*}, Joshua Neil Monty Philp ¹, Ian Nuberg ¹, Matthew Denton ¹ and Kim Alexander ³

¹ School of Agriculture, Food and Wine, The University of Adelaide, Urrbrae, SA 5064, Australia

² National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute, Vientiane P.O. Box 7170, Laos

³ Faculty of Science, Agriculture, Business and Law, University of New England, Armidale, NSW 2351, Australia

* Correspondence: manithaythip.thephavanh@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract: The participation of youth in agricultural entrepreneurship (agripreneurship) is beneficial for the sustainable development of agrarian societies that are transitioning towards the commercialization of agriculture. Accordingly, we investigated the phenomena that motivate practicing young, small- and medium-scale agripreneurs to pursue their careers, using the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) as a case study. To achieve this, we applied narrative inquiry techniques to the accounts of 74 young Laotian agripreneurs regarding their entry into agripreneurship. This enabled us to identify and describe common and influential paradigms that were subsequently interpreted from the perspective of entrepreneurship and behavioral studies of career decision making to explain the influence of motivations on the young agripreneurs. Our study has shown that despite the characteristics that set agripreneurship in Laos apart from entrepreneurship in general, commonly identified typologies of entrepreneurial motivation, particularly income, extrinsic benefits and emotional paradigms also motivate Lao youth to become agripreneurs. The application of narrative inquiry has revealed the emphasis some practicing agripreneurs in Laos place on the attainability of their career, which resulted in its practice by both opportunity-driven and necessity-driven entrepreneurs, with implications for the sustainable development of other countries in transition to commercial agriculture.

Keywords: youth; agripreneurship; motivation; Laos; narrative analysis; sustainable development



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1. Introduction

The pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunities in agriculture (agripreneurship) by youth has been promoted as a strategy to improve their livelihood opportunities and encourage their retention in agriculture, as the global transition of populations from rural to urban lifestyles may potentially compromise the sustainability of agricultural production [1]. In the developing world, agripreneurship has been hailed as a powerful tool for promoting the socioeconomic integration of young people and the key to avoiding rural depopulation [2]. The adoption of more entrepreneurial modes of agriculture by rural youth can lead to greater developmental outcomes because youth are relatively more enterprising, innovative, risk-tolerant and accepting of new technologies [3–6]. Thus, agripreneurship has become well established as a development strategy to facilitate youth empowerment, particularly in Africa [7] and South America [8]. Despite the increasing interest of research on the agricultural sector's potential to provide sustainable, income-generating opportunities for rural youth in developing countries, the challenges of youth participation in this sector and the options for overcoming them [2,8–11], and scientific literature on agripreneurship in developing countries has largely been neglected by mainstream research on entrepreneurship [12,13].

Encouraging more youth to effectively pursue small and medium scale agripreneurship opportunities where it may benefit them requires an understanding of the phenomena that may motivate them to choose this career as opposed to other careers. Motivations are foundational to an individuals' decision-making processes because they contribute to underlying rationales that accompany decision-making processes [14]. Accordingly, they are key predictors to a person's subsequent demonstration of entrepreneurial behavior [14].

The predominant conceptualization in entrepreneurship motivation, opportunity-necessity differentiation, also known as push-pull, acknowledges that entrepreneurship can be an employment choice out of necessity, or a positive choice to take advantage of an opportunity. However, it is becoming increasingly accepted that the opportunity-necessity differentiation oversimplifies the complex motivations underlying entrepreneurship [15]. Therefore, studies often differentiate motivations into a range of typologies, which commonly include variations of achievement, challenge, learning, independence, autonomy, income security, financial success, recognition and status, and sometimes include family, role models, dissatisfaction and community and social motivations [16]. Despite increasing interest from scholars and policy makers about the importance of entrepreneurship and potential benefits to agriculture [17], most theoretical and descriptive research has not adequately considered agripreneurship in developing contexts in which employment in cash economies is a less universal livelihood strategy and subsistence farming is common. The extent to which youth in Laos are motivated by established motivational factors from entrepreneurship literature factors to choose their careers, and to which they perceive agripreneurship as being able to cater to these motivations is unknown. Qualitative studies on entrepreneurs have identified aspects specific to relatively unique populations of entrepreneurs [16], indicating that qualitative methods are appropriate for exploring motivational factors and decision-making processes of young agripreneurs to correctly identify phenomena that can motivate youth to effectively pursue small and medium scale agripreneurship opportunities.

The aim of this study is to identify and describe the phenomena that motivate young small and medium scale agricultural entrepreneurs (agripreneurs) to pursue their career, and the processes of their influence, using the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) as a case study. To achieve this aim, we applied qualitative narrative inquiry techniques to the accounts provided by 74 young Laotian agripreneurs of their entry into agripreneurship. Our approach enabled us to identify and describe common and influential paradigms that influence the motivations of young agripreneurs in small and medium scale agripreneurial careers. By understanding these phenomena and the nature of their impact on the selection of agripreneurship as a career by youth, it may be possible for decision-makers to design interventions that result in more young people choosing this career and contributing to the sustainability of global food production.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Approach

The study applied qualitative content analysis [18], supplemented with narrative inquiry techniques, namely paradigmatic analysis of narratives and diachronic narrative analysis approaches, to both identify and understand the phenomenological drivers of the decision to become an agripreneur [19,20]. Narrative analysis procedures reveal the constructed story of an individual participant, while paradigmatic analysis of narratives uses both inductive and deductive means to identify common and contrasting themes between stories [19,21]. These analysis methods can be used separately, or in combination, depending on the aims of the research [21]. Similar qualitative methods have previously been applied successfully in studies which seek to understand influential phenomena that drive career selection, including studies of entrepreneurial careers [22–25] and careers for the public good that decision makers wish to promote, such as agripreneurship [22,23], nursing [26,27] and teaching [28]. All human research activities described in this study were

approved by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee, H-2019-110. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

2.2. Case Study Context

Laos is largely rural [29,30], with the youngest population in Asia [31] and is in transition to a more commercial agriculture sector [32,33] with three dominant commercial farming modalities: concessions, contract farming and small-investor farming. Development policies have prioritized large-scale investment over small-scale agriculture [6,34,35], with the smallholder scheme receiving the least support from the government compared with other schemes [36], despite the potential contribution the commercialization of smallholder agriculture leading to livelihood development.

In addition to a decreasing share of the population engaging in agriculture, Laos is also experiencing a low involvement of young people in agriculture. A recent study found that the average age of the agricultural workers is eight years older than non-agricultural workers in Laos [37]. The Lao Census of Agriculture [38] also revealed that nearly 20 percent of people from farming households were aged 45 or over. Given this decline, it is necessary to understand and promote youth engagement in agriculture to ensure the sustainability of food production in Laos.

2.3. Sampling and Participants

A total of 74 young, small and medium scale agripreneurs were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques [39] to participate in this research. The initial criteria for participation were (1) being a small to medium-scale agripreneur with landholdings ranging from 0.5 to 3 hectares according to the Lao Census of Agriculture [38], (2) being aged between 15 and 35, or a “youth”, as defined by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Youth Union [40], and (3) being willing to participate voluntarily.

The research team was provided with agripreneur profiles from the Lao Farmers Network (LFN), the largest network of commercial farmers groups or organizations in Laos with more than 4000 members, within 58 farmers’ organizations across 13 provinces throughout Laos [41]. There were 1120 members of LFN classified as young agripreneurs in 2019. Participants were accessed from Vientiane capital and Vientiane province in central Laos, and from Champasak and Salavan provinces in southern Laos. These provinces are demographically and geographically diverse, with a variety of agripreneurial modalities. In total, 757 young agripreneurs were registered with the LFN under 11 farmer’s organizations, including 659 in the coffee industry and 57 acting as a dual vegetables growers and collectors (middlepersons). Key contacts in the farmers’ organizations were approached with selection criteria suggesting suitable participants within their organizations. Prospective participants were contacted by the organizations. The selection of 5 to 10 representatives by each organization was based on voluntary availability. Additional participants were referred by either young agripreneurs, local community members or other organizations that the research team interacted with during the fieldwork period. Participants older than 35 years were considered if they were less than 40 and had been practicing agripreneurship for several years or were referred for participation because of their story or insight into youth circumstances, especially amongst organizations where there were no younger agripreneurs available.

2.4. Data Collection

In-depth interviews [42] were used to obtain narrative responses from the 74 participating agripreneurs. Before starting each interview, the research team introduced the research project, objectives and length of interview, and requested the signed consent from each research participant. The course of the discussion was largely set by respondents, following a broad question of what motivated them to become an agripreneur. Interviews were conducted at the young agripreneurs’ farms, cafe or at farmers’ organizations offices in the Lao language for approximately 90 min. The research team allocated 5 Lao researchers to

interview participants from October 2019 to February, 2020. Interviews were transcribed verbatim or recorded with the participant's informed consent.

2.5. Data Analysis

As a prelude to the analysis, a comprehensive familiarity with the gathered information and individual narratives as relayed by the participants was achieved by reviewing the content of the interviews. Both paradigmatic analysis of narratives and diachronic narrative analysis [19] were applied to synthesize and configure the data into explanations of the drivers of the decision to become an agripreneur by Lao youth. Paradigmatic analysis of narratives was applied to identify the common elements amongst the collected narratives to produce themes that offered explanations as to the narrative course, in this case, the transformation into an agripreneur. Paradigms were considered based on their frequency across participant responses, and the significance placed by individuals on these themes within their responses. Close attention was paid to linguistic practices such as word choice, repetition, hesitation and laughter when analyzing the responses and identifying paradigms [42]. The identified paradigms were characterized and the processes by which they influenced the participants to become agripreneurs were described. Diachronic narrative analysis [19] was applied to construct the story of individual participants from the gathered paradigms of their responses to examine the influences of phenomena on the narrative conclusion, i.e., becoming an agripreneur.

3. Results

3.1. Participants

The LFN identified 52 volunteers who participated in the research, whilst a further 22 participants were identified through snowball sampling. Of these participants, 6 were from independent farmers' organization (outside LFN) and 16 did not belong to a farmers' group or organization. Characteristics of participating farmers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Key characteristics of participating young agripreneurs ($n = 74$).

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	50	67.6
	Male	24	32.4
Age	≤20	15	20.3
	21–25	11	14.9
	26–30	12	16.2
	31–35	20	27
	36–40	16	21.6
Marital status	Single	24	32.4
	Married	50	67.6
Education	None	1	1.4
	Primary school	12	16.2
	Secondary	44	59.5
	College, University	13	17.6
	Master's degree	4	5.4
Location	Vientiane capital	27	36.5
	Vientiane province	14	18.9
	Champasak	23	31.1
	Salavan	10	13.5
Member of farmers' group	No	16	21.6
	Yes (groups under LFN)	52	69
	Yes (group outside LFN)	6	9.4

Table 1. *Cont.*

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percent
Years as agripreneur	≤1 year	12	16.2
	2–3 years	27	36.5
	4–6 years	7	9.5
	7–9 years	11	14.9
	≥10 years	17	23
Agricultural sector	Coffee or coffee combined with other crops/livestock/tourism	30	40.7
	Fruits	3	4.1
	Mainly livestock	12	16.2
	Mainly vegetables	19	25.7
	Rice or rice combined with other crops/poultry	8	10.8
	Agriculture and education	2	2.7

3.2. Narrative Paradigms

All participants responded to the semi-structured interview approach describing their experiences narratively. They described their decision to become agripreneurs within the context of specific circumstances and personal motivations that drove the decision. Circumstances and motivations varied between individuals but showed considerable overlap across narratives, allowing for their identification as relevant phenomena and an insight into how these phenomena can influence the decision to become an agripreneur. It was common for agripreneurs who were interviewed to identify multiple phenomena when recounting why they became agripreneurs.

We identified five predominant paradigms in the gathered narratives that influenced the practicing small and medium scale agripreneurs to choose their careers: (1) Income, (2) Extrinsic benefit, (3) Attainability, (4) Emotional and (5) Societal-communal. The narrative paradigms are described in detail as follows. Amongst these paradigms, some typologies regarding specific motivating circumstances were also identified. The frequencies with which the predominant paradigms and selected motivation typologies within those paradigms that were encountered across the 74 gathered narratives are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of identified paradigms and select specific motivations.

Paradigm	Specific Motivation (If Applicable)	Frequency
Income	Market potential	21
	Other income motivations	31
	Total	52
Extrinsic benefit	Self-employment	6
	Control of working time and/or place	10
	Other benefit motivations	13
	Total	29
Attainability	Positive circumstances	17
	Negative circumstances	19
	Total	36
Emotional	Passion for agriculture	23
	Pride and sense of accomplishment	16
	Total	39
Societal-communal	Influence from close referents	7
	Other influences	11
	Total	18

3.3. Income Paradigm

The need, desire or market potential to generate income was the most common theme that occurred in the stories provided by young agripreneurs as they described what motivated them to become an agripreneur. This need or desire to generate income was oftentimes related to one or more specific purpose, including personal independence, supporting children/and or parents financially, financing schooling, study materials and/or machinery (e.g., vehicles) for themselves or others, extending their existing resources and time in activities to escape poverty and/or developing their agricultural livelihoods through reducing labour and increasing efficiencies.

Beliefs about Income and Market Potential of Agripreneurship

Some participants indicated that they believed agripreneurship compared favourably with other career choices in terms of income generation, with a young agripreneur indicating that the potential to earn money was greater than that of a governmental employee, generally considered to be a desirable career. Most believed agripreneurship would lead to achievement of their desires in generating income.

The income potential of agripreneurship was sometimes narratively connected to specific market opportunities. Young agripreneurs who incorporated market phenomena into their responses predominantly indicated that involvement in this career could result in good income as particular agricultural products were in constant market demand. For example, one participant stated, “cattle are always demanded by the market”, whilst another stated “coffee is popular among tourists”. Young agripreneurs also considered potential markets when choosing their career as indicated by participants stating, “there are not many suppliers for these types of products”, and “I saw coffee imported from abroad, so I want to produce Lao coffee and sell domestically”. Considering demand and supply, young agripreneurs looked toward favourable markets as demonstrated by the claim “agricultural products are valuable and have good prices, so there is little chance of making losses”. Some agripreneurs who had contractual agreements within the private sector stated that the demand was so high that the private company gave them bonuses as an incentive to encourage them to increase or maintain their supply capacity and product quality.

3.4. Extrinsic Benefit Paradigms

Whilst income is a common consideration in all manner of career decisions, the selection of agripreneurship specifically as a means of meeting the desire or need to obtain income is based on a complex array of beliefs about agripreneurship in terms of circumstances and personal identity. Participants identified other characteristics of agripreneurship that appealed to them and resulted in their choice of career and satisfying income requirement. However, acting on positive beliefs about the benefits of agripreneurship to become an agripreneur was not exclusively discussed in the context of achieving a source of income that had these benefits. In these accounts, the perceived benefits were a motivation. The most common benefits that were described by participants motivating them to become agripreneurs were related to self-employment, control of their time, self-sufficiency and learning and personal/professional development opportunities.

3.4.1. Self-Employment

Benefits related to self-employment were a common theme amongst participants' motivation for choosing agripreneurship as a career. This motivation could be expressed in terms of seeking to obtain desirable advantages of self-employment, by becoming an agripreneur. Examples mentioned were, opportunities to be their “own boss” or avoiding undesirable disadvantages of an employee, for example “working for others”. Furthermore, they stated that this career created personal happiness when they managed their own businesses and were responsible for business decisions.

3.4.2. Control of Working Time and Place

Control of one's working time and place was a recurrent theme in explanations of why young Laotians chose to become agripreneurs. Agripreneurship may satisfy the desire to manage one's time because it is more flexible, and young agripreneurs can design their working time and shifts. As remarked by agripreneurs, "this job does not require me to work every day" and "I only need to work in the morning". This contrasts with typical office workers and labourers that have a fixed working time. In some responses, the benefits of controlling working hours were placed in the context of other time demands, such as "taking care children" or "staying with parents" or enabling them to "rest during the day" or work "part-time in order to study". Agripreneurial careers may also allow the young agripreneurs to work in their hometown, with several agripreneurs placing value on being able to "live in my hometown" and "not having to leave my home".

3.4.3. Self-Sufficiency

Achieving self-sufficiency for food production was an important desired aspect according to several agripreneurs. Young agripreneurs could produce their own food and reduce household expenditure and by knowing the source of their food they could be confident about food safety. Self-sufficiency was linked to an eco-friendly and sustainable lifestyle that appealed to some participants and gave them a sense of pride, with one participant stating "I don't want to buy vegetables and rice. I want to have home-grown products because it is better for my health". Another believed that by becoming an agripreneur, they were "promoting good health and environmental conservation by consuming organic vegetables".

3.4.4. Learning and Personal/Professional Development

A desire and willingness to learn was identified by young agripreneurs as a key influence on their decision to pursue an agripreneurial career. They built their careers by exploring opportunities and were willing to learn by doing. They explained that basic skills required for this career included fundamental knowledge about agricultural production, processing, value adding, marketing, business, communications, resources management, teamwork, and leadership. Due to climate change, market fluctuation, agrarian transition, digitalization, changes of policy, trade, social-economic, and infrastructure, this career required young people to continuously build on their knowledge and skills. Despite facing challenges, young agripreneurs generally expressed a willingness and confidence in their ability to learn, adapt and overcome obstacles. Expressions of willingness and confidence from various agripreneurs included such statements as "I have a desire to learn about agricultural techniques", "I have a desire to learn how to grow coffee", and "I am willing to learn about growing and selling organic vegetables and conserve the environment".

3.4.5. Career Security

An agripreneurial career experiences could provide a sense of security for youth, in contrast to activities such as non-agricultural business, politics, services and office work, which were perceived as fluctuating and unstable due to the possibility of staff lay off or job downgrades. In contrast, agripreneurship were perceived to provide more stable and secure employment.

3.5. Attainability Paradigms

Participants based their decision to become an agripreneur on the attainability of the career. Agripreneurship was widely described as an attainable career, being neither too hard nor requiring inaccessible inputs or qualifications; however, these descriptions of attainability were framed either positively or negatively by the participant.

3.5.1. Positive Framing of Attainability

Positive framing occurred in the context of descriptions of personal resources and capacities that made it easier for an individual to become an agripreneur or to practice agripreneurship. Specific resources that participants identified that enabled them to practically attain an agripreneurship career included fundamental agricultural materials, tools, farm infrastructure and land. Access to these resources could be either through their own resources or inherited from their family with an agricultural background, or through the communal resources of their farmers groups. As an example, one participant remarked: “my parents built the fundamentals of this job for me. I was familiar with this job, and I have my own land”. Access to resources including inheritance or land use rights or borrowing land was clearly advantageous at the early stage of their business.

3.5.2. Negative Framing of Attainability

Negative framing of attainability in narratives was characterized by descriptions of resources, capacities, qualifications and options that the agripreneur lacked or lost, which drove them to select agripreneurship as an attainable career. Characteristic negative framing included responses such as “because of poverty, we, youth, have less job choices”, “I do not have any proper qualifications”, “I do not have high education” and “I am not good at study”. In these narratives, agripreneurship was characterized as a career that could be embarked upon and practiced despite the perceived personal shortcomings. Without other career options, possessing fewer skills and experiences and with limited resources, these participants became agripreneurs, as recounted by one participant: “I do not have a job choice, I have a limited capital, but agriculture does not require a high investment”. Similarly, another participant recalled, “If I was not doing this job, I have no idea what I would be doing. I only have skills and experiences in farming because when I was 19 years old, I was mainly involved in helping my family farm, so I decided to start to do it on my own.” Some youths were faced with actions related to significant life events that motivated them to enter into an accessible career. In one such case, a couple decided to make use of their land as self-employed agripreneurs after marriage, because the participant “did not know what else to do to earn money”, because they “have not got any qualifications to apply for a job”.

The attainability of agripreneurship as a career enabled a safety net for young agripreneurs who had failed in their initial goals. These goals included their initially preferred business activity. For example, one participant recalled, “I failed in another business, so I do not have another job to do, so I turn to this job because agriculture is the main livelihood and income generation here in my community”. Other setbacks were recalled, relating to education attainment, with one participant explaining, “I failed to gain entrance to university to continue my studies, and I have only a coffee farm to fall back on”, and another explaining: “I did not have a chance to continue my studies so I started an agripreneurship business in my hometown”.

Similarly, some participants could not continue earning an income as they had in the past and needed to look for an alternative income opportunity, thereby increasing their resilience. For example, a young agripreneur located in the new Mekong River dam construction site in Champasak traditionally had relied on fishing for her livelihood and lacked skills to take up other activities. Faced with a calamity, she explained “I could not catch as much fish as before the dam was built and with less fish caught in 2019, I joined a commercial and clean agricultural project in our village and then started an agripreneurial business”.

3.6. Emotional Paradigms

3.6.1. Passion for Agriculture

Intense positive emotions related to the pursuit of fulfilment and self-expression, and strong inclinations towards agriculture, entrepreneurship and/or agripreneurship, were a prominent feature in the responses of participants used to explain their choice to become

an agripreneur. Passionate descriptions included “love” for agricultural activities and farming in general. Some participants expressed specific passionate thoughts about an involvement with specific plants, vegetables or livestock. Their passions were deeply personal or linked to their family background, remembrances from their childhood, their interest in consuming specific agricultural products, their happiness achieving in this career and valued reflections. For example, one young agripreneur in Champasak engaged in this career based on her parents’ love story. Her father was a coffee trader, her mother was a coffee farmer, and they met because her father regularly bought coffee from her mother. To her, coffee trees were linked to her birth and her happiness. Her parents sent her to Vientiane province, central Laos, to study English, and after graduating from college she returned to her hometown in the South of Laos and renovated her parents’ old coffee farm. By chance, she met a tea trader from Japan with whom she could communicate in English, and they decided to become business partners to export coffee to the United Kingdom and Japan.

3.6.2. Pride and Sense of Accomplishment

Pride was a commonly discussed emotional driver in becoming an agripreneur. Participants who described pride as motivation for choosing agripreneurship indicated that they believed in advance that being an agripreneur, or certain expected outcomes of practicing agripreneurship, would result in feelings of pride and a sense of accomplishment that they desired to obtain; therefore, they became agripreneurs in accordance with this desire. This was often related to altruistic motivations such as protecting environmental and human health, assisting other farmers, providing financial support to family members, being independent/self-reliant, and producing products for local consumption. For example, organic young agripreneurs highlighted they had a sense of pride because organic vegetables helped the environment and was good for both farmers and customers’ health. Some felt they experienced joy through assisting other farmers. Some participants claimed this career was a way to assist other farmers and youth in terms of being a good role model, creating more job opportunities, creating more platforms for exchange of knowledge and skills, upgrading agricultural products and prices, and improving the reputation of Lao local agricultural products. For example, several young agripreneurs in Salavan and Champasak, in Southern Laos, spoke of their motivation to be involved in upgrading agricultural products and prices and increasing the reputation of local Lao agricultural products. One participant stated that he grew up observing his parents successfully work in agricultural coffee production to generate an income. His ambition is to further develop the coffee sector in Laos, particularly in his hometown, where the majority of locals produce coffee. He is involved with the local coffee farmers’ cooperatives and works toward improving the quality and price of Lao coffee, with aspirations to export internationally.

3.7. Societal-Communal Paradigms

Participants described various social pressures and encouragements that contributed to their decision to become an agripreneur. These included support or encouragement from their significant others, seeing the successful cases of other agripreneur role models and perceptions of community or governmental/(I)NGO projects that support realizing their ambitions.

3.7.1. Interpersonal and Cultural Influences

Compliance with perceived social influences was a recurrent theme in participant responses. Desires and encouragement of family members, and personal desires to conform to and maintain their cultural heritage, motivated young Laotians to choose agripreneurship as a career. Several participants highlighted that the encouragement or desires of their family compelled them, or that the career had approval from those close to them. Participants recounted this with examples including, “my grandparents implanted the idea to never abandon agricultural work”, “my grandmother established a farmers group, so I

joined her”, “my neighbour encouraged me to do this job as it can generate income”, “my parents taught me to do this job” and “my mother did not want me to leave our community because we need people to help out in our family”.

3.7.2. Role Models

Role models provided motivation for youth to engage in this career, with participants recounting having observed salient agripreneurs who have achieved desirable outcomes and wished to attain similar benefits for themselves. As participants remarked, they “saw many people do this job and they have a lot of money”, and “saw other people who do this job successfully”. Role models were often people who resided within or outside their communities, family members or others. In some examples, the role models were the parents of the participants who recalled, “I see my parents they can earn money by growing vegetables, so I want to do the same” or “I grow up seeing my parents do agriculture for a living and generate income. We are well off due to coffee growing”.

Some agripreneurs were motivated by the desire to become role models themselves. For example, two colleagues working for a private company in Vientiane capital teamed up as business partners to establish a small-scale hydroponic farm and claimed their motivation to engage in this agripreneurial career was based on “helping farmers to earn more income”. They stated that they could be good role models for other youth in Laos involved in urban smart farming. They had a working example of a profitable enterprise from farming in small urban areas. Innovative practices emerged from their learnings, field observation and by accessing knowledge and skills via YouTube. This was an example of part-time agripreneurs who were gainfully employed in primary careers involving supply chains and finance. These experiences underpinned their part-time agripreneurship, and benefitted their business acumen, creating a sense of pride.

3.7.3. Community and Governmental/(I)NGO Projects

Support from communities, namely the existence of strong farmer groups, organizations or cooperatives in their communities and governmental or international(I)NGO projects support were also highlighted as avital drivers facilitating young agripreneurs to engage in an agripreneurial career. Young agripreneurs highlighted that support existed in their communities and they felt that they could access this support and the support would facilitate their start-up business ideas. Support usually arose from local farmers groups, and agricultural or rural community development projects. Participants claimed “I have a farmer’s group to support me to raise pigs and to do cultivation”, “I have support and encouragement from a project”, “I am feeling more comfortable doing this career after joining the farmer’s group”, “before I only produced for consumption purposes, but with a commercial agriculture promotion project in my village, I started producing for commercial purposes” and “I joined a commercial and clean agriculture project in our village, and then started an agripreneurial business”.

4. Discussion

4.1. Influence of Narrative Paradigms on Agripreneurial Motivation

The paradigms that emerged from the gathered narratives are generally consistent with phenomena that influence career decisions relating to both agriculture and entrepreneurship in the literature.

4.1.1. Income Paradigm

Our finding that income was the most consistently referenced paradigm amongst the responses is consistent with studies of both agricultural and non-agricultural entrepreneurship career decisions [43]. The reported belief that the income potential agripreneurship compares favourably with other jobs in Laos explains the decision of income motivated youth to choose this career. However, this belief did not appear to be prevalent across the study participants. Instead, the influence of income potential on the choice to become

an agripreneur varied amongst our gathered narratives, and sometimes income motivations were emphasized less than non-financial motivations, or not at all. For example, participants from subsistence farming backgrounds tended to set goals to emerge from poverty by integrating or linking to a more market driven or commercialized production. Meanwhile, those from commercial agricultural backgrounds pursued more value adding and processing businesses. In addition, some participants including those from farming backgrounds highlighted non-financial motivational factors, namely passion as their motivation to engage in agripreneurship prior to financial reward. Our finding that agripreneurs who inherit a farm were more motivated by financial factors while agripreneurs who do not inherit a farm were more motivated by non-financial factors has previously been observed in the European Union [44] and suggests a relationship between income motivation and opportunity-driven agripreneurship; however, the findings related to subsistence farming, poverty and financial pressures better fit the conceptualization of necessity-driven agripreneurship. It has been noted that there is no strong distinction of motives related to income security and financial success based on the opportunity-necessity differentiation of motivation from previous studies [16]. We attribute this to the broad appeal of income generation.

4.1.2. Extrinsic Benefit Paradigms

According to dominant models for understanding and predicting behaviours, namely the Theory of Planned Behaviour [45] and its derivatives, positive attitudes toward a behaviour can arise from beliefs about the benefits associated with that behaviour, and in turn increase the likelihood that one who holds those beliefs will engage in that behaviour [46]. This model has been broadly applied and validated in a range of behavioural studies including those which treat a career choice as a behaviour [47,48]. Participants in our study tended to conform to this model by recounting desirable benefits of being an agripreneur, specifically earning potential, being self-employed, having control of working hours, being self-sufficient for household food needs, engaging in opportunities for learning and personal/professional development and career security. These benefits of agripreneurship identified as motivating participants in our study to become agripreneurs show considerable overlap with commonly identified motivation typologies for both agripreneurs [22,49] and entrepreneurs in general [16]. In the narratives that we gathered, youth who had an awareness of these possible benefits and a desire to obtain them became agripreneurs in accordance with this desire. Participants were generally satisfied that their motivating beliefs were accurate and becoming an agripreneur fulfilled their desires, indicating that increasing awareness of the personal benefits of agripreneurship might result in more favourable attitudes amongst prospective career decision makers and may lead to greater engagement of youth in agripreneurship.

4.1.3. Attainability Paradigms

The attainability paradigms we describe appear to be reflective of the predominant conceptualizations in entrepreneurship motivation: opportunity-necessity differentiation. Whilst it is observed that entrepreneurs in developing countries are more likely to be necessity-driven [15,23] our examination of attainability as a narrative paradigm in our results indicates that it has motivated both necessity-driven and opportunity-driven youth to become agripreneurs. Youth who described themselves as becoming agripreneurs because they had skills and resources that would make a successful practice of agripreneurship attainable closely follow patterns of behaviour described across entrepreneurship literature as opportunity entrepreneurs, as becoming an agripreneur enabled them to capitalize on the perceived opportunity. The attainability paradigm we observed also provides an explanation as to why necessity-driven youth would choose agripreneurship, as opposed to other careers, when faced with economic hardship. That both necessity-driven and opportunity-driven youth became agripreneurs because of the attainability of this career is reflective of dominant models for understanding and predicting behaviours, which posit

that people are much more likely to intend to enact certain behaviours, such as embarking on a career, when they feel that they can enact them successfully [45,46].

4.1.4. Emotional Paradigms

The prevalence of emotional paradigms across our gathered narratives demonstrates that drivers of agripreneurship have some commonality with drivers of entrepreneurship in general, in that passion and other intrinsic factors are widely considered to be crucial in motivating entrepreneurial behaviour [50]. Regarding agripreneurship specifically, passion has been found to be the strongest career motivation of practicing young agripreneurs in a study undertaken in Malaysia, because it allowed them to accept as worthwhile the anticipated tasks that were unpleasant and would cause them to encounter dirt and harsh climates [22]. Furthermore, passion for agriculture and/or agripreneurship appears to sometimes cause youth to forgo other career opportunities. Amongst participants in our study, one young agripreneur who was supported by her parents to pursue higher education in Vientiane province, under the expectation that she would find a white-collar job in Vientiane, instead returned home and became an agripreneur because of her strong passion for agriculture. Similar phenomena have emerged amongst young agripreneurs in other settings, with passion identified as a motivation to remain in agriculture when hypothetically presented with a white-collar career alternative, despite the mainstream appeal of the latter [22].

Our finding that young Laotian agripreneurs often acted in accordance with, or sought pride from, becoming an agripreneur is best explained by examining the individual examples in the context of other associated motivations in the same narrative. Pride was widely described in the context of ownership, accomplishment, discretionary power, helping others and living in accordance with their personal values, common motivations in entrepreneurship and decision literature [51]. Despite these factors providing extrinsic benefits to the agripreneur and/or their communities, the intrinsic benefit of pride appears to be especially meaningful for the interviewed participants.

4.1.5. Societal-Communal Paradigms

The importance of the significant others, namely parents or guardians, family members and close friends on an individual's decision making in selecting agriculture as a career path has been emphasized in other studies including amongst undergraduate students in the USA [52], amongst farmer entrepreneurs in Africa [53], in Asia, amongst Malaysian youth agripreneurs [22] and Gen Y in Malaysia [54]. Family members and close friends are considered the most influential people for decisions related to entrepreneurship [55], including entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector [22,54]. Young agripreneurs in Malaysia acknowledged that emotional and financial support, and agricultural opportunities and exposures from their families motivated them to engage in agripreneurship [22]. The pursuit by an individual of a career that is believed by that individual to have approval from peers and people of importance is explained by the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which posits that individuals are more likely to enact a behaviour, such as pursuing a career, if they believe that it has approval by peers and people of importance [45,46].

Although the influence of significant others has been shown to be a widespread influence on youth agripreneurs, it has been reported that parents and older generations throughout Asia were often in favour of their young generations leaving farming-related livelihood activities and migrating to urban centres in search of employment opportunities [56]. Similar trends are reported for parents in Laos, where they are likely to encourage their children to continue studying towards a higher degree so that they could work in an office environment or in non-agricultural fields such as finance, accounting and banking [57]. These circumstances were also observed in some of the gathered narratives in our study, where some Lao young agripreneurs highlighted that support and encouragement from their parents, guardians and family members were significant factors in motivating them into both agripreneurship and other careers. The influence of the expectations and

approval of others on decisions to act a certain way is moderated by motivation to comply with those others, according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which will vary amongst individuals according to their stability against pressure from their social environment [58]. In the case of some youth agripreneurs, the willingness to comply with parents may have been less than with other family members and close friends [54]. The influence of role models on youth agripreneurs who participated in our study is reflective of a consistent observation amongst studies of youth agripreneurship in other contexts [59], especially for raising awareness and shaping/stimulating interests for early stage agripreneurs [22,60]. Role models thus could be incorporated in policy intervention to encourage, reform or change individuals' aspirations and future-oriented behaviour [61].

4.2. Limitations

Our findings, particularly those regarding statistical frequencies of responses, are not necessarily generalizable, given the limited sample size (approximately 7% of young farmers in the LFN though an unknown percentage of all young farmers and agripreneurs in Laos). However, the consistency of our explanations of the observed paradigms that reflect dominant conceptualizations in both behavioral and entrepreneurship research [16,45,46] indicates that our findings reflect the broader phenomena acting on youth in Laos and in agrarian societies undergoing commercialization. Given that our study sample population were all practicing agripreneurs, the phenomena influencing their decision to become agripreneurs are biased towards positive motivators; therefore, our results do not identify phenomena that may negatively impact the decision to choose this career. Narrative insights have revealed the motivational aspirations of young agripreneurs, guiding them to engage in a meaningful career, as found in both behavioral and entrepreneurship research.

5. Conclusions

Our study has shown that despite the characteristics that set agripreneurship in Laos apart from entrepreneurship in general, commonly identified typologies of entrepreneurial motivation present in the literature, particularly income, extrinsic benefits and emotional paradigms also motivate Lao youth to become agripreneurs specifically. The application of narrative inquiry has revealed the emphasis some practicing agripreneurs in Laos place on the attainability of their career, which resulted in its practice by both opportunity-driven and necessity-driven entrepreneurs. Small- and medium-scale agripreneurship in Laos may be more attainable than in other country contexts because Laos is an emerging and developing nation with a largely rural population [30], in which approximately 75% of young people in Laos work in the agricultural sector [62]. As our research has shown, there exist young people in Laos with poor resource endowments who had the capacity to become agripreneurs but did so only after motivation by family, friends and role models. If this were to hold true for other rural youth in similar circumstances, it may present an opportunity to engage them by raising awareness of the extrinsic benefits one can obtain by practicing agripreneurship, and by cultivating passion and pride towards agripreneurship as a career. Future research may benefit from identifying the phenomena that limit the engagement of otherwise capable rural youth in agripreneurship, particularly those who are subsistence farmers who have yet to make a transition to commercially-oriented agriculture.

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