

Agrarian Change and the Governance of Poverty in Southeast Asia

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The literature on rural change presents theoretically diverse approaches that suggest alternative ways of analysing and dealing with poverty. Many accounts of rural transformations in Southeast Asia argue that deagrarianization is occurring as economic diversification, labour mobility, and a relative decline of income from agriculture affects rural landscapes. Other approaches emphasize processes of commodification and accumulation and agrarian differentiation, suggesting that such processes are increasing the precarity of a rural underclass who have lost access to land and who are left with little to sell but their labour even while labour markets are unable to absorb them.

The first approach mentioned above sees poverty and vulnerability as emerging among those left in agriculture and unable to move into more specialized or diversified livelihoods, to access new labour, entrepreneurial opportunities or to migrate out. Poverty can be solved by enhancing the skills and capacities of the poor and by improving access to new labour opportunities, education, and work in the cities and by economic growth and the expansion and continuation of rural diversification. The future of agriculture will be left to specialists and to a few farmers who position themselves in (organic and touristic) niche markets or who engage in clever combinations of on and off farm work. More recently this agenda has extended to include distributional policies to attract rural vote banks, combining private sector-led agricultural development with the rolling out of social protection policies for risk management and thereby providing transfers to the most vulnerable households facing entrenched poverty and vulnerability.

The second view sees poverty as caused by capitalist relations of production and the exclusion or adverse inclusion of sections of the population as relations of production are increasingly dominated by trade and agro-industrial resource extraction. In this second view, the repertoire of poverty solutions needs to be more radical. This may encompass renewed state engagement in rural development, more transformative forms of social protection that aim to move the poor from dependency into productive livelihoods, and the redistribution of incomes and assets through land reform or progressive taxation.

This panel invites papers that respond to these approaches. Contributions are particularly welcome that provide empirical analyses of the both agrarian change and the policy responses they provoke in emerging Asia. Some of the key questions to be considered here include:

- What are the key mechanisms and processes leading to the production and reproduction of poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity in rural Southeast Asia?
- How are States responding? How are they taking into account changing mechanisms of poverty production?
- How are the key policy responses working out for the poor? For instance, how useful or successful are social protection, new land reforms, governance reforms or other policy approaches for addressing emergent forms of vulnerability and poverty?

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