

A Descriptive Analysis of Migrants' Strategies Regarding Land Holdings in Their Villages of Origin: Preliminary Results from a Case Study in the Northeast of Thailand

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Abstract

This article looks at the decision made by Thai rural-urban migrant households when selling farm land rather than renting land out, giving it away or lending it free of charge. We propose that the safety net function of farm land in a fluctuating urban economy might make temporary transfers and inter-personnel exchange of land rights more valuable than land sales, which imply a complete loss of the full bundle of property rights. We observed a small sample of rural-urban migrant from Khon Kaen Province in the Northeast of Thailand through interviews with their rural relatives. Those relatives answered qualitatively about the economic situation of migrants, the use of migrant's land in their absence, the type of transfers undertaken, the nature of the transactions and what it implies for the migrant households and the land-users. The interviews reveal that there is indeed a hierarchy in the degree of social safety net

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function that can be safeguarded through each type of transfers; land sales reduce considerably the access to the safety net directly or indirectly related to farm land, while land loans guarantee the best access to rural social protection. The safety net function of farm land for rural-urban migrants and how it affects the nature of farm land exchanges cannot be reduced to a simple analysis of asset property and needs to be taken into account within the wider complexity of the social network and rural ties in providing consumption smoothing mechanisms.

Introduction

This study is a preliminary introduction to wider research which looks at one possible explanation of why land is so rarely exchanged through the sale market, especially when compared to land circulation rates observed through renting, inheritance and other customary non-market modes of exchange. In various papers, land has been said to be a social safety net for rural households, as a tool for food production, a secure store of value, and a crucial element in the intertwined social network solidarity. This hypothesis, although, has never been more than mentioned,² if we except a few theoretical papers related to

² C. C. Soludo, *Comparative Institutional Development: Lessons from Rural Land Markets in Africa*, University of Nigeria, draft, Dec 2000; Thomas C. Pinckney and Peter K. Kimuyu, "Land Titling: Good, Bad, or Unimportant?" *Journal of African Economies*, Vol. 3, Issue 1 (1994): 1-28; Alain De Janvry, Gustavo Gordillo, Jean-Philippe Platteau and Elisabeth Sadoulet, eds., *Access to Land, Rural Poverty and Public Action* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jean-Philippe Platteau, *Institutions, Social Norms and Economic Development* (Amsterdam: Hardwood Academic, 2000).

common property.³ Moreover, the papers that have described the social security net function of land have been generally focusing on the Sub-Saharan case.

We believe that this social safety net function of land is crucial in a country like Thailand and decided to look empirically at the truthfulness of such a hypothesis to explain, at least in part, the low liquidity of land sale markets with respect to the benefit of other “temporary”, “informal” or “interpersonal” ways of exchange.

The complexity of analyzing land sales mainly arises because two intertwined decisions are taken simultaneously by an economic agent before selling land. In the first place, he must decide whether it is worth or not parting with a plot. This decision is somehow understood in the “occupational choice” framework and has to do with life cycle theory, land quality, and optimal farm size, among others. This is not the issue that we want to focus on here. In the second place, once the agent has decided to part with a plot, he needs to choose through which channel he intends to do so: should he sell? Rent the land out? Lend it for free to some relatives? Leave it as a pre-mortem inheritance? It is precisely this second step of the decision that we are investigating through this case study in Thailand. We propose that the safety net function imbedded in land has a role to play in this “second step” choice between different types of transfers; at least, a role to play in making the fundamental decision to sell, aside from any other transfers.

The twofold choice simultaneously undertaken in the land sale decision makes empirical work on the determinant of land sales versus other ways of transfers quite complicated. Disentangling the two choices is even harder when we know that land sales are quite rare, and are found in much too small a number to be meaningfully compared to the figures of other transfers; a very wide sample of rural households would have to be gathered before we could come up with

³ Jean-Philippe Platteau, “The Gradual Erosion of the Social Security Function of Customary Land Tenure Arrangements in Lineage-Based Societies,” *Insurance Against Poverty*, ed. Stefan Dercon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jean-Marie Baland and Patrick Francois, “Commons as Insurance and the Welfare Impact of Privatization,” *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 89 (2-3), (2005): 211-231.

any significant number of sales. To overcome these difficulties, we decided to look for a population displaying the highest possible rate of land transfers: rural-urban migrants. Indeed, migrants from rural areas who now live far away from their villages are for the most part unable to farm their land themselves, and are, therefore, faced with the necessity of transferring their plot one way or the other.

The overall purpose is, therefore, to determine whether the land safety net function of land has its role in the way those rural-urban migrants part with their plots. But we feel that, before coming so far, we need to understand the whole panel of ways available to exchange plots in Thailand, how they work, and what they exactly imply for both parties of the exchange. Indeed, our hypothesis implies that transferring land by ways other than sales is actually meant to maintain an access to the land safety net function. We cannot advance such an argument without providing at least some rough evidence that this is true, and we need foremost to understand how the various temporary and/or informal transfers of land rights can preserve the insurance function of land better than land sales do. This is what we aimed at in this article; we interviewed a number of rural villagers about their acquaintances or relatives within rural-urban migrant households who own or used to own farm land in their village of origin, and tried to understand what was done with the land during migration time and how it interacted with the access to rural safety net mechanisms. The study site chosen was the Northeast, thus our results might not be extendable to other provinces. Northeast Thailand was chosen because it displays the lowest rate of activity in the land market with the highest prevalence of out-migration.

The results of this study are, therefore, descriptive as well as case-specific, and cannot be used for generalization or causality making. Moreover, we think that only an in-depth anthropological study could provide all the necessary information on the implicit social complexity in the informal transactions of land. We, nonetheless, hope that this study will provide sufficient insight on how these exchanges work to help us carry out a quantitative study in further research.

In the first section, this article exposes the situation of land access and transfer in a historical perspective. The next section explains the theoretical framework behind the “safety net value” of land and justifies its use in the case of Thailand. The third part presents the main results of the field research and examines the results with the theoretical propositions. The last section provides a conclusion.

Farm Land and Land Exchanges in Thailand: A General Assessment

Farm Land in Thai History

The best account of farm land ownership in Thai history was made by Charles Mehl in 1986.⁴ According to his research, land tenure in Thailand has been greatly influenced by a long history of an endless land frontier that ended sometime in the 1980s and shaped a pattern of small landholders with individualized property rights.⁵ Until the middle of the 19th century, land control “*was as much a matter of state policy as of the free choice of the populace concerned.*”⁶ The Northeastern part of the country specifically followed a pattern of settlement through the initiative of the people themselves who chose the most convenient and richest land over the course of their migration routes. The frequent migration of the population probably contributed to what Mehl calls the “*lack of attachment of rural Thais to any particular plots of land for religious, cultural, or social reasons,*”⁷ which still describes pretty well the relationship that Thai farmers nowadays maintain with their land; although sentimental attachment to one’s plot is observed, it is not backed up by specific religious or mystic beliefs, or strong community attachment and norms.

⁴ Charles B. Mehl, “Social and Cultural Aspects of Land Inheritance and Transaction in Thailand,” Discussion Paper Report No. ARU 52, Research Unit, Agricultural and Rural Development Department, World Bank, 1986.

⁵ Michael Moerman, *Agricultural change and peasant choice in a Thai village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

⁶ Siamwalla 1972:7, quoted in Mehl.

⁷ Mehl.

After the 1850s, state ownership over land and control of who had access to the land was gradually replaced by individual property rights held by those farming the land. At the beginning of the 20th century, different areas of the country were progressively opened to individual claims based on land use and revocable as soon as this use ended, and almost always for very small portions of land, with the first legal titles of ownership printed.

For a pretty long time then, the units of ownership pertaining to farm land seem to have been small farming households,⁸ and even smaller in the North and Northeast of the country.⁹ This history of recurrent migrations and of the early individualization of property rights are not the only factors in understanding the current modes of access to land. Equally important are the bequest and marriage customary laws, and the land frontier culture that dominated until the 1980s. In Thailand, land inheritance is oriented toward equal division among daughters;¹⁰ as land was free to clear everywhere, newly-wedded couples would farm their portion of parental land made available pre-mortem, and complement it with land-clearing. Overall, young couples separated quite early from the core of the households.

Until the 1980s, therefore, the most important ways to access land was land clearing, land inheritance, and, in some areas opened to commercialization, land sales, which have been allowed for a long time, but were active almost only in urban and sub-urban areas.¹¹ Rent contracts were rare except around Bangkok, since free land was everywhere available for no charge, and land loans among relatives

⁸ Francois Molle, "Social and economic patterns of landlord-tenant relationships in the Chao Phraya Delta, Thailand: An Historical Perspective," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, 33(3), (2002): 517-543.

⁹ Mehl.

¹⁰ Andrea Whittaker, "Women and Capitalist Transformation in a Northeastern Thai Village," *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Book, 1999); R.C.Y. Ng, "Some Land-Use Problems of the Northeast Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 4 (1), (1970): 23-42.

¹¹ Molle.

seem not to have been frequent, or at least accounts are rare and do not provide accurate figures of their prevalence.¹²

Land Access from the Closure of the Land Frontier until Today

In the 1980s, the land frontier was finally reached. With the demographic growth still at a peak, land that had always been an abundant good grew scarcer. Although rice cropping technologies had improved sufficiently to allow cultivation on a larger scale, land holdings rather tended to decrease in size, due to fragmentation through equal inheritance.

This sort of revolution in land availability had huge consequences on both property rights and land access patterns. Although land ownership had long been private or household grounded, retaining legal guarantees over the land had to be increasingly valuable, in line with the theoretical prediction of the standard property right literature.¹³ At the same time, one of the most central way of accessing farm land, virgin forest clearing, had almost disappeared. Pre-mortem inheritance took over, and for some rural households today, it is the only way they will ever acquire land.

In this general scenario, what happened to land sales? Theory would predict a spur in the activity of the land sale markets all over the country. First of all, land scarcity is supposed to increase land value as a commodity and, therefore, market turn-over rates.¹⁴ Secondly, because large scale titling programs were implemented in 2000, according to a survey by Phélinas,¹⁵ around 80% of the land was

¹² Rob Visser, "Aspect of Social and Economic Change in a Village of the Central Plain of Thailand," Paper presented at the Thai-European Seminar on Social Change in Contemporary Thailand, University of Amsterdam, 1980.

¹³ Harold Demsetz, "Toward a Theory of Property Rights," *American Economic Review*, 57 (May 1967): 347-359; Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economic of Agrarian Change Under Population Pressure* (New York: Adline Publishing Company, 1965); for a review, see Platteau 2000.

¹⁴ For an empirical study in Rwanda see Catherine André and Jean-Philippe Platteau, "Land Relations under unbearable stress: Rwanda caught in the Malthusian Trap," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, Vol. 34, 1998.

¹⁵ Pascale Phélinas, *Sustainability of Rice Production in Thailand* (New York: Nova Street Publishers, 2001).

covered by a legal document, called a “*chanot*”, reducing transactions and information costs, and fostering mortgages.¹⁶ Thirdly, agriculture has become more commercialized than ever, making land a readable input in the market economy. Last, but not least, emigration rates in rural areas became pretty high,¹⁷ specifically in the poorest areas of the country. Those migrants can reasonably be expected to relinquish their plots when leaving their farm, or after a few years in urban areas. Nonetheless, a spur in the farm land sale market is not what is observed today, or at least not as a general pattern in the whole country.¹⁸ Land sales, moreover, seem to be concentrated in sub-urban areas. Grandstaff, et al. also mentioned that the huge migration movement out of the Northeast has not led to the consolidation of land holdings through sales, stopped the fragmentation pattern or spurred tenancy.¹⁹ What is described here is not case-specific and is reported in various countries of Africa.²⁰

The low rate of turn-over in the farm land markets does not mean that the land ownership pattern has suddenly become inert with the closure of the frontier. Indeed, access to land increasingly goes through temporary transfers of use rights. Land rental has increased a lot, although this phenomenon is mentioned only in the Central

¹⁶Yongyuth Chalamwong and Gershon Feder, *Land Ownership Security and Land Values in Rural Thailand* (The World Bank, Washington, 1986); Rebeca Leonard and Kingkorn Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya, “Thailand’s Land Titling Program: Securing Land for the Poor?” Paper presented at “Politics of the Commons” International conference, Regional Centre for Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, July 2003; V. Rattanabirabongse, R. A. Eddington, A. F. Burns, and K. G. Nettle, “The Thailand Land Titling Project - thirteen years of experience,” *Land Use Policy*, Vol. 15(1), (1998): 3-23.

¹⁷ If only for the Northeast, well over two million people were estimated as living in another province or country. Terry B. Grandstaff, Somluckrat Grandstaff, Viriya Limpinuntana, and Nongluck Suphanachaimat, “Rainfed Revolution in Northeast Thailand,” *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 46(3), (Dec 2008): 289-376.

¹⁸ Phélinas observes in her survey that in Roi-Et Province in the Northeast, only 11% of the land area had been acquired through purchase. Phélinas.

¹⁹ Grandstaff 289-376.

²⁰ S.E. Migot-Adholla, et al., “Indigenous Land Rights Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa: a constraint on productivity?” *The World Bank Economic Review*, Vol. 5 No.1, (Jan 1991): 155-175; Platteau 2000; De Janvry et al.

Region, and clearly does not describe the situation of the Northeast.²¹ In 2003, 79% of the holders owned the totality of the land they farmed, and 8% did not own any of their farm land. Interestingly, half of those 8% of households farming in tenancy recorded that they used the land free of charge.

Land rentals are not the only way through which temporary land use rights can be transferred. Informal accounts during previous field work revealed that informal land loans between relatives are frequently practiced. Grandstaff et al. also mention free transfer of ownership.²² We did not find any recent research on the nature of these informal land loans in Thailand, or on their prevalence.²³

Land as Social Safety Nets: Theoretical Framework

What we describe above is quite a good example of the kind of puzzle we are interested in; although all the pre-conditions for the development of farm land sales are present, sales still remain a minor way of exchanging land.

Among Other Theoretical Propositions: The Safety Net Value of Land

The economic literature provides many explanations as to why land sales might not be an optimum way of exchanging land. The most popular theory on this issue points to the informality of land rights to be at the origin of everything.²⁴ This theory has been put into doubt through worldwide case-specific empirical research, refuting any prevalent statistical relationship between land legal ownership systems and land market activity; and this theory may not apply well to

²¹ In *Isan*, according to Grandstaff et al., tenancy has not undergone any major increase. Grandstaff et al.

²² Grandstaff et al.

²³ Except for Molle, who states that tenancy between relatives is part of a bigger set of exchange which does not follow a market rational. Molle.

²⁴ See for instance: Klaus Deininger, Songqing Jin and Hari K. Nagarajan, *Determinant and Consequences of Land Sales Market participation: Panel Evidence from India*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4323, 2007; Yongyuth.

Thailand which has implemented legal private ownership for a long time.²⁵

Another way to look at our question is to focus not on what impedes land sales, but on why keeping land ownership rights might sound more attractive to farmers. The economic literature's answer to such an approach is to call upon the various functions of land, which are not reproduced in land sales prices.²⁶ If these various functions of land can be kept by transferring only temporary use rights, through rental for instance, then not selling is a perfectly rational strategy. Among these various functions of land, the following have been more cautiously studied: the credit access aspect – land ownership allows collateral and credit; the maintenance of political power; the safe saving stock use; the speculative potential; and the symbolic, religious or emotional function, and of course the input use in agricultural production. Finally, a last function has been frequently mentioned but scarcely looked at empirically, and which might be accurately applied to the case of Thailand, is farm land as a safety net for a vulnerable population. Indeed, land can produce staple food for a very low entry cost, or even no production cost at all, apart from the shadow cost of labor.²⁷ It is an indestructible asset with a quite secure value; and although not much has yet been said on this matter, farm land has

²⁵ Rattanabirabongse.

²⁶ See for instance: Michael R. Carter and Dina Mesbah, "Economic Theory of Land Markets and its implications for the Land Access of the Rural Poor," *The Reform of Rural Land Markets in Latin America and the Caribbean: Research, Theory, and Policy Implications*, Land Tenure Center Paper No. 141, University of Wisconsin-Madison, April 1991; Hans P. Binswinger, Klaus Deininger and Gershon Feder, "Power, Distortions, Revolt and Reform in Agricultural Land Relations," *The Handbook of Development Economics, Vol. III*, eds. Jere Behrman and T. N. Srinivasan (Amsterdam, Oxford: North-Holland, 1995); Eric B. Shearer, Susana Lastarria-Cornhiel and Dina Mesbah, "The Reform of Rural Land Markets in Latin America and the Caribbean: Research, Theory, and Policy Implications," *Land Tenure Center Paper No. 141*, April 1991; De Janvry.

²⁷ Daniel Maxwell and Keith Wiebe, "Land Tenure and Food Security: A review of Concepts, Evidence, and Methods," Land Tenure Center Research Paper No. 129, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Jan 1998.

some undefined role to play in the functioning and enforcement mechanisms of rural social networks.

The hypothesis of a safety net value embedded in farm land sounds especially attractive when analyzing the situation of Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular. The precursor of all the more recent works on the role of risk aversion and second best insurance strategies is, of course, James Scott and his book on the overwhelming importance of rice security for Southeast Asian farmers.²⁸ Later studies have been set up in the Asian region to look at how risk aversion might influence behaviors.²⁹ That land transfers in Thailand are among those many decisions that are affected by risk aversion, therefore, does seem plausible. This is all the more plausible if we look at the debate that followed the 1997 crisis; as rural-urban migrants lost their jobs in the cities, they massively returned to their villages until the situation settled down, and were absorbed in the agricultural labor force. The exact number of those returnee migrants at that time is not easy to figure, as data on internal migration are scarce, and the returns were temporary and not all occurring at the same time. Nonetheless, it has been believed to have been around two million.³⁰ Agriculture and communities were then designated as a crucial safety net in a modernized fluctuating economy, where no public social security has yet been implemented. If agriculture has served as a safety net, then farm land has also.

²⁸ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant, Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

²⁹ Christina H. Paxson, "Using Weather Variability to estimate the Response of Savings to Transitory Income in Thailand," *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 82(1), (1992): 15-33; Hans P. Binswanger, "Risk Aversion and Credit Constraints in Farmers' Decision-making: a Reinterpretation," *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 20(1), 5-21, 1983; Marcel Fafchamps and Susan Lund, "Risk-Sharing Networks in the Philippines," *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol. 71(2) (2003): 233-632.

³⁰ S. Subhadhira, S. Simarak, and S. Srilas, "The Economic Crisis and Rural Households in Thailand: Impact and Response," *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 42(1), 2004.

Different Transfers of Land Ownership for Different Outcomes on the Land Safety Net

There is, however, a major difference between our “safety net value” argument and the analysis of most of the other functions of land; collateral use of land, the power guarantee, the speculative function and, to a certain extent, the symbolic function of land, can all be efficiently maintained through temporary transfers of use rights through rental. We believe that this is not as straightforward as for the case of the land safety net function. Farm land works as some kind of insurance if its owners expect that they will be able to grow food, make agricultural income or sell land for cash income at any time necessary; or if they can expect to use it as an implicit claim for help from the social network. We, therefore, provide some predictions as to how each type of land transfer used by migrants – rentals, free loans, or sales – might impact the availability of the land safety net function.

As not much has been written on this matter, we can only suggest a few elements of how and how much of the land safety net functions are safeguarded through the large panel of transfers available. First, we predict that land loans might be an effective way to keep a quick hand on the land safety net function; it allows for a flexible return to farming and safeguards the social safety net and relationships with village relatives. Land rental is also a temporary exchange of land rights allowing return to farming, but it might not be as flexible as land loans and does not have the same power in enhancing social network assistance.³¹ Finally, as an irreversible loss of land rights, land sales probably imply a greater loss of social protection.

The description that we just made on each transfer's implication for the access to the safety net function of land is only hypothetical. The validity of this account might depend on the exact way in which those transfers are implemented in Thailand. Although we might find some literature on tenancy rules in Thailand, it is uncertain whether those tenancy rules are the one chosen by migrants. Moreover, as we

³¹ We do not talk about gifts as pre-mortem inheritance here, as it is probably a rarely used way of transferring land by the migrants, since few of them have reached the age to bequest land.

have already mentioned, not much has been said about land loans, and land sales have rarely been examined beyond their official definition. We believe that the impact of those transfers for social protection might, in fact, depend both on the nature of the contract and on the relationship existing between the two parties of the transaction.

Field Results

Data Description

Our purpose was to get a general overview of what is going on with farm land as migrants are away in other provinces or countries, and to investigate to what degree each type of transfer implemented could guarantee the use of the land as a social protection tool in relation to the decision to sell. Such a study requires a qualitative, rather than quantitative study, being more descriptive in nature.

The difficulty in the design of our study comes from the double location of our two objects of enquiry: migrants are away in urban areas, but their land is in a rural location. We can, therefore, not be in proximity to both, the migrant and the land. We chose for this part of the study to go where the land is located. We set interviews in some rural villages, with the relatives of migrants knowing the migrant's situation well, or who are currently using the migrants' land. By doing so, we probably lost some information on the migrants' economic situation, but gained information on land use, land transfers, and had an interesting insight into the nature of transfers from the other side of the transaction – the receiver.

We chose to keep our survey in Khon Kaen Province for logistic reasons. The agriculture in Khon Kaen is a mix of rice fields and highlands devoted mainly to cassava and sugarcane cultivation. The land is generally quite dry and of poor quality, although recent investment in irrigation facilities and water infrastructure has improved access to water. We chose six villages thanks to the CDD survey of 2009. Our sampling of the villages mainly attempted to find areas with a great concentration of long-term migrants. Interestingly, the villages displayed various prevalence rates of out-migration with migrants heading toward different provinces; a great heterogeneity in

land quality and land scarcity, as well as uniformity in the degree of commercialization of agriculture. In each village, we interviewed the village headman – or headmen when the villages were separated in different sub-administrative areas. After the interview, the headman was asked to provide a contact for the migrants' relatives whom we could interview within the village.

For the survey to be meaningful, we implemented a number of criteria. Firstly, we required that targeted migrants should have left the village for more than a year and be permanent migrants. Secondly, we wanted migrants who had left with their whole household; we did not interview migrants when they had left children with relatives in the village. Finally, we interviewed only migrants who had owned some land before leaving the village, or had land of their own in the village now. We included a few migrants whom bequest transfer had not officially been made, as we were interested in seeing how those migrants would act with this very land.³²

Of course, as aforementioned, we could not interview the migrants themselves as they were away, so we went to their closest relatives in the village. Almost 40% of the respondents were the migrant's parents, and the rest were siblings, or more distant relatives, such as uncles, aunts or cousins, who were currently using the migrant's land. Except for one case, respondents had a good knowledge of the migrants' situation and land use, although they knew less of their life in the city. Altogether, we interviewed 29 persons, plus the village headman interviews and informal discussions with other migrants' relatives or friends. Five of those respondents could answer for more than one migrant household. 97% of our respondents were nuclear families, with an average age of respondents of 48 years old, and 59% were women. Their main profession was farming. The migrants for who they answered about owned in average eight *rai*, and 45% of the migrants owned some highlands used for cash crops; 1/4th of the land owned by migrants was reported with a particularly low productivity, even compared with the standard of the province; 2/3 of

³² Indeed respondents referred to this land as the migrant's despite the absence of actual ownership title.

the migrants were qualified by their respondent relatives as poor or very poor; and 1/3 as rich or very rich. Around 40% of the migrant households had independent occupations, such as street-selling, a small restaurant, or their own business, repair shop or small textile industry. About 30% were working as low skilled workers in factories, and 10% had high jobs, such as government workers or skilled labor in factories. The average number of member of a migrant household was 3.5.

We asked respondents about the migrant household's occupation before departure, and their current situation and wealth in the city. We gathered information on the migrants' land, and on every possible transaction that the household had made since leaving – sales, mortgage, rental, loans, and gifts. We also asked respondents their general opinion for the reasons why a migrant household might keep or sell land and on the specific value of land for a migrant. We sometimes found it hard to get information, as land remains a sensitive issue, but compared to what we expected, we felt that land transfer issues were actually less problematic for respondents than it might have been elsewhere.

In the following, we give our main impression of the interviews. We will sometimes provide percentages of answers, but those percentages do not mean much, as the sample is very small.

Land Sale Activity

Before digging into the precise nature of each type of land transfer, we first wanted to make sure that our question was actually relevant to the case of the Northeast of Thailand. First of all, the interviews in the different villages confirmed that land sales are a rare phenomenon; most villages had not seen more than one transaction in the last five years, residential land included. Some village headmen could not recall any transactions in this period of time and had to go back to a longer period of time (10 years). Only one village displayed a higher rate of land sale market activity, with four plots that had been sold in the last five years, of which one was by a migrant, and all the other plots by villagers. In all the villages, land loans, free of charges,

were frequently used to transfer plots, followed by rental. Bequests, of course, made up the highest share of land transactions.

We have already said that land sale market activity in the visited villages was quite low. But a low activity on the market can come from three different sources: institutional difficulties which make transactions difficult for both parties of the exchange; a rationing from the demand side; or a rationing from the supply side. Obviously, there were no significant institutional constraints on sales, as market activity is fully allowed, and land property right definition is quite clear. In three of the villages we visited, all the land was recorded under a full ownership title – a *chanot*. In the three other villages, most of the land was also under those full ownership titles, and as for the land which did not have proper documents, owners always had a proof of ownership of some kind, or a title with lower ownership coverage than the usual *chanot*. We did not get any account of conflict on plot boundaries or such, and villagers seemed to have confidence in community enforcement of local rights if any threat was to come upon someone's untitled land. Moreover, respondents did not see in the institutions any constraints on selling or buying land if they had decided to.

We, therefore, tried to look from which side of the sale market the rationing on transactions came from, since most of the economic literature has focused on demand constraints in access to credit and liquidity to buy the land. Nonetheless, in all of the six villages, the rationing seems to rest on the supply side. We asked village headmen and the respondents whether it would be hard to find a buyer once you decided to sell land, and whether it would be hard to find a piece of land on sale if you decided to buy one. All the village headmen's and 88% of the respondents' answers were that a lot of people would be ready to buy land if only there were plots to be freed within the village, but that supply of land was lower than demand.³³ They assessed that finding a buyer when selling land was an easy and rapid task. From those interviews, it seemed that the low amount of land

³³ The 22% of respondents who did not agree with this statement made contradictory answers to both of the questions, on buying and selling.

sales transactions observed in the villages is mainly supply driven, confirming that it is wise to investigate the reasons that might hold back an agent from selling land.

The supply driven constraint on land sale market activity was even more obvious when we focused on migrants. Migrants, indeed, own land that could be made available on the market; as expected, they use the sale market more frequently than the village population. A bit over 25% of the migrants had sold some land since leaving their village. 10% of them rented their highland and loaned the rice fields free of charge, to which could be added another 10% of households for which the arrangement stood at the limit between a loan and a sharecropping agreement. The rest of the migrants had loaned free of charge all of the land. So, altogether, 65% had loaned at least part of their land, which makes loans free of charge the first type of transfer used by migrants. Once more, finding a buyer was no constraint for migrants. Overall, land sales are a minor way of transfer of plot rights in our sample.

We now come to the description of the different types of transactions and what they might imply for the social protection function of land.

Description of Transfer Types

Land Sales

Land sales in Thailand are quite close to what land sales would be in any developed country. In the villages we observed, land sales were a permanent transfer of the whole bundle of ownership rights, accompanied by a transfer of legal documents. Return to land use after the transaction is not possible, and all the land functions definitely change hands at the time of the sale. Nonetheless, sales were not all equivalent in the degree of social protection loss, and, from respondents' answers, it seems that the degree of this loss greatly depends on the identity of the buyer and his pre-existing relationship with the migrant.

It is first interesting to look at how land sales are conducted by migrants. From a general agreement, migrants who decide to sell land will first ask their relatives, and specifically the ones who are

currently using the plot, whether they want or can buy the plot. Sale prices could be negotiated to help relatives to purchase the plot, but it is doubtful whether the price can really go far under the market price – respondents' answers were uncertain on this point. If the relatives are not interested, or cannot afford the land, the owner then puts his land on the general market, available to the highest bid. Overall, it seemed that not proposing the land first to the relatives would be a scandalous outrage.

The nature of land sales seemed to diverge according to the identity of the purchaser. First, when purchases are among relatives, the transaction aims at a "fair" price; whereas when purchasers are not among relatives the aim is for the highest bid. Secondly, the identity of the purchaser changes the chance to re-purchase a plot after selling it. All respondents agreed that a plot sold to a relative could, under certain conditions, legitimately be re-bought by the first owner, although he would have to buy it at market price that is almost always higher than what he had received when selling. On the other hand, respondents saw no reasons why the previous owner should be entitled to re-buy a plot if he had sold it to a non-relative, the less if the purchaser was from outside the village.

We might then advance that land sales to relatives are, to a certain extent, more "reversible" than land sales to non-relatives. Yet, although respondents mentioned those facts in general terms, we did not observe it directly. Thirdly, return to farming the land was impossible after selling, but if migrants had sold land to relatives and had to come back with serious financial problems with no income alternative, they could possibly farm the land previously owned under shared farming – sharing production costs and income – with the relative, or would be more kindly taken as labor on relative's farm for at least a short period of time in exchange for a roof and food. This seemed to explain most of the migrants' interests in keeping land within their relative networks, even upon selling.

Respondents made another very interesting point concerning land sales. They stated that migrants who had sold all their land holdings in the village would not come to visit their offspring and relatives as often as others, and would not give much news.

We are inclined to suggest the following:

- Land sales obviously lead to the loss of collateral use for consumption loans, except if it allows buying new land somewhere else.
- Land sales make return to farming – food production and independent income generation – almost impossible, except if land has been sold to relatives. In this case, land may be re-bought, or the returnee migrant in need might be allowed to share farming on his former plot. Return to farming is, in any case, seriously compromised.
- Land sales when the migrant has no land left in the village seem to generate a cut between the migrant and his village social network or relatives' social network. This does not mean that the migrant will be refused any help further on. Nevertheless, we can imagine that it will limit the firmness of the relationships and decrease the degree, amount and probability of being helped when needed.

To conclude, land sale is clear cut with the land function as a social protection; nevertheless, selling to a relative might lessen the impact of land sales on village social network's assistance in case of income shock befalling a migrant's household.

Land Rental

Land rental is another type of market exchange, although as compared to land sales, it is temporary and concerns only use rights. A temporary transfer of use rights is considered as rental if a payment is made in exchange of the transaction. We include in the "rental" category both pure rental forms and sharecropping forms.

Rental or sharecropping was not frequently quoted by our village respondents as a way migrants used to transfer plots' right while away. As we already said, only 10% of them used pure rental forms in association with free land loans, and 10% more had settled some kind of sharecropping agreement, although the respondent did not call it so. Village headmen and many respondents, nevertheless, said that they knew or had heard of some migrants renting their land to someone else when leaving the village.

The story that we come up with on land rental is, therefore, based less on observed situations than on accounts and general knowledge by our informants, and might have to be improved through a largest sample of migrants. Nonetheless, the story makes sense and we relate it here.

First of all, the land which is eligible for renting is almost entirely made of highlands. Highlands in the Northeast are the upper-level land, less reachable by water, not prone for rice cultivation and planted with cash crops, such as cassava, sugarcane, corn, or tree plantations. Rice fields were mostly transferred through land loans, but in some case were seen in sharecropping agreements. So, to sum-up, pure land rental is made when the crop is traded, on the highlands, and sharecropping is rarely used by migrants on rice fields.

The second characteristic of land rental is that they were rarely made between relatives, but between people who had no pre-existing relationships, except for living in the same village. To sum-up, land rental by migrant is seen mainly between non-relatives, while relatives resolve to land loans.

Finally, we attempted to get a look at how exactly the rental agreement is defined and enforced with the migrant being away. Firstly, all of the rental contracts we could directly observe, and most of the contracts that respondents had heard about, were renewed every year. If the migrant has decided that he wants to get his land back, he has every legitimate and legal right to do so at the end of the rental year, since the contract actually states so. Most of the rentals followed pure rental forms, sometimes under written contract and sometimes informally.³⁴ A fixed amount of money is paid before the farming year, sometimes accompanied by a cash deposit, which helps migrants to monitor land use and degradation on their plot. According to the villager respondents, this form of pure rental contract was preferred, firstly because it saved migrants the time of commercializing the crop and with the necessity to come back every year and, secondly,

³⁴ In his study of the Chao Phraya delta, Molle specifies that most contracts are oral, but this does not make the tenancy insecure, as other well-functioning mechanisms are settled to enforce the terms of the arrangement. Molle.

because it avoided failures to pay by the tenant and allowed a smooth enforcement of the contract.

To sum-up, it seems that rental, although not very frequent, allows safeguarding a significant amount of the social safety net function of land. It allows a return to farming the land as the contract is set for a short period of time, but the date is not very flexible, and migrants will have to wait until the end of the contract duration to evict the tenant. As rental is only a partial transfer of land rights, the migrant can still make use of his holding to ask for a loan from a bank or a saving group. Moreover, the rent that he regularly derives from the transaction is a source of income which can help make ends meet. Finally, it is not clear whether land rental has any impact on social network assistance in case of loss. If the rental has been made to a non-relative when a relative actually had views on using the plot, relationships might be deterred. Otherwise, land rental should not impede nor improve the assistance received from the social network.

Land Loans

As aforementioned, most migrants actually left their land under the free use of some relatives. Those relatives could be elderly parents, offspring, uncles and aunts, or cousins. Understanding the precise nature of the use contract was not easy. Indeed, respondents stuck to the “use for free” answer. A general pattern, nevertheless, seemed to emerge.

First, land loans are rarely completely free. Although the migrant does not ask for any price or portion of the crop for using the land, he is somehow entitled to some part of it, specifically when the land is rice field. The deal seems to rest on the migrant receiving some of the harvest for his consumption, never for sale or making a profit. He is not to ask anything, but the user is to give to him voluntarily. The quantity given varies significantly. Some migrants were reported to refuse the rice offered. Some said that the migrant took only a bag or two, and not regularly, depending on whether they would be present at harvest time or had the transport facilities to carry it back. This was the most frequent situation observed. Other stated, nevertheless, that migrants got their due every year, which amounted to about 10% of

the harvest made on the land. In any case, it is still very far from what we observed in sharecropping agreements mentioned above.

It is difficult to assess whether the volume of rice transferred in exchange for the free use of land is related to an owner/user wealth differential, or to migrants' wealth only, or to migrants' lifestyle, or to how close is the tie between owner and user (parent-child versus distant relatives), because our sample is too small. Nevertheless, those who received the highest share of rice were also generally those who came at harvest or re-planting time to help their relatives to work. From villagers' answers, we also had the feeling that the closer the relationship between the migrant and his "free" tenant, as in the case of children to parents, the closer the transfer of rice stands to an "altruistic" gesture. On the other hand, the more distant the relatives, between cousins for instance, the closer the transfer of rice stands to an informal and undeclared repayment in exchange of a kindly made favor.

Respondents also said that being able or not to use the migrant's land for free did not change the fact that help is due between relatives. Nevertheless, all of them added that ties between the migrant and his relative using the land might be tightened by this win-win transaction, and that relatives might be entitled to provide even greater assistance knowing that they are using the migrant's land for free. This kind of free loan was also really helpful for the migrant, who, according to the respondent, could have a trusty person to monitor his land in absence.

Finally, all respondents agreed that under these kinds of temporary transactions, the migrant would be able to come back to his land any time. If he needed to come back in the middle of a harvest season, he would share farming with the relatives currently using the land (getting some part of the profit, sharing food and meals and so on), and would then get his full ownership bundle of rights back after harvest. But land-using relatives were never seen refusing to give back use rights on land at the end of a farm season, or refusing to share farming with the migrant in the middle of the season if asked.

To sum-up, land loans do indeed preserve a great deal of the social safety net function of land; return to food production and land farming income is made possible and flexible; the use of land for bank

loans is of course still allowed; and finally, land loans strengthens the relationship between migrants and their relatives using the land. Social network functionality is somehow protected or even tightened by the “free” or “gift-like” nature of the transaction.

In conclusion, this description seems to confirm a hierarchy of the different types of land transfer according to the degree of land social protection loss. Sales to a stranger, as it directly and irrevocably cuts access to land and lessen social ties, implies a definitive loss of farm land social safety net value. Sales to a relative is next, as they almost irreversibly cut access to land but reduce the damages done to social ties, and safeguard a small niche for return with relatives. Rental is third, which allows keeping collateral functions and a return to land possibility, but reduces the flexibility of return to the land’s income generation activities until the end of the rent contract. The type of transfer of rights which safeguards best the social safety net value of land is free land loans to relatives, as collateral use and return to farming are both allowed, and social ties are kept or even increased.

Selling versus Keeping Land

We then tried to assess the validity of the safety net hypothesis as one of the potential causes of migrant households limiting their supply on the land sale market in favor of other temporary or informal ways. When asked, the safety net value of land definitively owned by migrants made sense for almost all the respondents. We investigated both respondents’ general opinion and their migrant relatives cases for the reasons that stopped migrants from selling their land when leaving the village or later, and the reasons that led migrants to keep their land even after a long period of time away. After listening to their spontaneous answers, we proposed various potential reasons to them and asked their opinion about it. What generally came out from their answers was twofold.

Reasons for Keeping Land Rights

First, keeping land was deemed necessary for the migrants who wanted or needed to come back to the village. Migrants could need to come back for two reasons; the first reason has to do with private

preferences which led them to prefer a life in the village. But respondents stated that although this reasoning was frequent when a single member of the household left to work, it was rarer when the whole household left. As for the second reason, even when migrants had no specific preferences for a life in the village, they would keep some land there just in case of serious problems in their new urban life, such as financial difficulties, debts, job loss, and so on.

One condition for the argument of land as a security upon return is that selling the whole holding makes things much more complicated for those who need to come back after encountering serious problems. When asked whether having no more land was a barrier for migrants who wished to return, respondents explained two different scenarios. For a migrant who had gotten rich, being landless was not a problem upon returning, as they would be able to buy some new land, or to rent some for a start. But for migrants who had to come back because of financial difficulties, the situation would be the complete opposite, as they would not be able to buy new land or to rent a plot, their only solution being to farm on some relatives' holding, through share work, or to look for off-farm work, which is not always available. The poorest migrant households with no land would, therefore, be restrained in their ability to return, or in their abilities to sustain a livelihood upon return. Moreover, some respondents added that whatever the migrant's wealth level, landlessness always made returns more costly and difficult, because of the cost and time wasted looking for new land. We, nonetheless, need to note that, according to a few respondents, the situation of landless migrants upon return is not perfectly homogeneous, even among those who return because of being hit by some income shocks; indeed the capacity to sustain a livelihood in the village also depends on the ability and willingness of the migrant's social network to provide assistance. Here again, the identity of the buyer of the migrant's plot might matter, and a plot sold to relatives might be of some kind of assistance when migrants look upon their offspring's generosity.

The second spontaneously stated reason for keeping land in the village when migrating was related to old age and children's bequest; migrants keep land so that their children would themselves have some

land at their disposal in the village. Although most agreed that the migrant's children were often used to the urban life and had few abilities for farming, they still observed that even if migrants themselves had made a good situation of their own, they had no guarantees about what their children would have to cope with; leaving them some land, even land that they would hardly be able to farm, would help secure their life. The other concern was that having farm land at disposal, even in a small size, is a strong guarantee for old age.

Respondents also agreed upon other reasons which explained why some prefer to keep some land. Land can be used to get a loan with the bank. Respondents did not agree that migrants would often use land for investment loans, as to do so, they would have to return to the village and borrow from a local bank, which is tiresome. But, in case migrants encountered severe problems, such as illness, they would then go through the time-costing procedure to be able to make consumption loans to sustain their life. 90% of the migrants agreed that keeping some land in the village was a strategy that migrants should all follow, for the reason we mentioned above. The only exception to this alleged best strategy was stated concerning well-off migrants who had good jobs and, therefore, did not fear the need to ever come back to farming. Those migrants were seen to have reasons to sell, especially if selling the land in the village could help them buy new fixed assets – land or houses – closest to their new place of life.

We are, therefore, tempted to conclude that land does have a safety net value in the eyes of the respondents, and that they evaluate this value as important in migrants' decision to keep land. If our respondents were true, then the role of land as a social protection for migrants is related to land allowing for the production of food; to it being an occupation that you can do whatever the state of the labor market; to a thing that links you to your broad relatives; and to its use for getting loans.

Reasons for Selling Land

Those were the reasons stated to keep land. We cannot, by deduction, conclude as to the reasons of selling land, which might lie on a completely different line of reasoning. So, taking the problem the

other way around, we asked respondents why their migrant relatives had sold land if this had indeed happened, and asked their general opinion on the matter when land sales had not occurred. The straightforward answer was that migrants who have sold must have had financial problems and urgently needed money. Land would be sold as a last result, after the car or the motorcycle, stocks of crops, if available, gold, or livestock.

The idea of selling land to invest in something else was not widely agreed upon. Nonetheless, if we changed slightly the question into selling land to invest when migrants were already well-off and had secured a good livelihood in their new place, respondents enthusiastically agreed. Moreover, they all explained that, except for those who were forced into sales because of unfortunate events, selling migrant households anticipated never coming back to the village to live. In some cases as well, respondents stated that migrants had sold their land in the village to buy new land somewhere else, generally residential land or even a house.

Overall, two different profiles of selling migrants emerged. They were stated to be either very wealthy with a good situation; therefore selling all land at once, save for the house sometimes which could be used at times for visits. Or they were very poor and having financial problems and selling either the whole holding or only part of it depended on the size of their holding relative to the amount of money needed.

What can be concluded from this section, although with caution, confirms our first hypothesis. Land has a value as a safety net for migrant households. This can lead them to prefer keeping it while being away. When they are wealthy and return to the village or loans for consumption are not longer expected, the land loses part of its social safety net value. But this might not lead to automatic sales if other criteria are taken into account in sale decisions. From our interviews, one of those other criteria could be a huge wealth differential between the rich migrants and their relatives using the land, leading to sale restraint for something like "altruistic" reasons. Another reason could be a long planned craving for returning to the village and improving the farm with the earned money. Finally, land

safety value as a restraint to selling land might also crack down for those who stand at the bottom of the economic “stability” chain. For those migrant households, when crossed with urgent money needs, the immediate liquid value of land might overpass any claim for any later need of the social safety net function of land, leading to what the literature has referred to as “forced sales”.

Digging Deeper Into the Safety Net Theory

Our main hypothesis on the role of a safety net value of land in the decision to keep rather than sell land seems to be strengthened by our preliminary results from the fields. But our interviews did not only allow confirming what we had already theoretically understood, it also permitted us to dig deeper into what the role of land might actually be for the social protection of migrants and how this might impact the theory on the decision to sell.

Land’s Role in Social Safety Net Insertion: Is Individual Ownership Really Individual?

Inheritance from parents is the main mode of access to ownership of land in the region, following an equal split between daughters.³⁵ When children get married, they receive some land from their parents as pre-mortem inheritance, and the parents keep some of their own land for themselves which is split after their death. This system simultaneously allows young couples to access land, and parents to keep incentives for their children to take care of them when they retire. The transfer of legal ownership on the land is not always made immediately: young couples are often seen with *de facto* ownership on a plot but with no legal document in their name for a period that varies from a few months to many years.³⁶ This situation confirms a blurred limit between what family and individual household claim on land.

³⁵ Although, in present days, because of increasing scarcity of empty land, parents holdings are very often distributed between all children – including sons.

³⁶ The legal transfer is not done either because parents do not have the opportunity or want to keep some reserve right at hand.

What implications does this have on the decision to sell land? All migrants who wish to sell first have to ask if any of their relatives are interested in buying the land. If that is the case, then the outcome is easy and the sale is made more or less informally. If it is not the case, or if the relatives cannot buy the plot, then the migrant is not advised to take the final decision alone; their relatives, and of course their parents, have a say as to the desirability for them and the relatives network of selling – or “letting go” of – the land to someone else. This is where the actual name on the ownership title might matter, although absence of ownership was not seen as a mere barrier to selling land; even in cases where the relatives were against selling, the migrant actually could sell against the will of their parents.³⁷

What does this suggest about our topic? Firstly, the safety net value of land cannot be looked at alone without having a systematic inquiry into what is at stake in the relatives' network. Secondly, if village relative networks are important in safeguarding a social protection for migrants, then we have to consider the complexity of the implication of land sales for the relationships between migrants and their relatives. Although property rights are private and individuals are the real decision unit behind any transfer of land, relatives do have an implicit claim on land that they can use through bargaining, negotiations and enforcement through threats of alienating or keeping the migrant distant from one of his main source of assistance, the relatives network, in a world where public social protection is inexistent.

Some previous studies have already mentioned the role of relatives' claim in limiting the amounts of land sales and the real extent of individualization in agriculture.³⁸ What we add here is that this role of relatives in the land transfer decision has an impact on what sales mean for social protection considerations; selling land might in some cases not only mean an impossibility to return to the land, but also generate a distance or even serious conflicts between the

³⁷ We observed one such case; threatening their parents at the worse, the migrant obtained their agreement and sold the land to a non-relative.

³⁸ Angelique Haugerud, “Land Tenure and Agrarian Change in Kenya,” *Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 59 (1) (1989): 61-90.

seller and his relatives, which are a part of the migrant's safety net strategy.

Land Safety Net Value as a "Social Norm"

Before concluding, we wish to develop an additional element which came out from the interviews with the villagers. Farm land ownership as a way to safeguard one's economic survival, be it for a migrant or a villager, was admitted without any doubt by all our respondents. We felt, through their responses, that the land safety net value of land was a kind of common knowledge shared by all and stated by all. Keeping some land for security appeared to be the "good" or "wise" thing to do. But some respondents also told us that even if they thought keeping land was essential, they saw a lot of people selling land to buy a car or other immediate goods. This could be interpreted as a case where the consideration of land being an access to social protection is actually acting as a social norm. If what we propose is true, it might have important implications on the way this land safety net value influences selling decisions, and how it is meant to change over time. The economic literature is far from reaching a consensus on what social norms actually mean for economic decision making, and how they might evolve through time. Some of this economic literature has underlined that social norms might appear for a rationally grounded reason,³⁹ but, given the system of transmission of those social norms, their disappearance might be slow and progressive. If the social safety net value of land is indeed derived from a social norm, then it will impact the consequences that a better public social protection or improved income security for individuals can have on the selling decision. In fact, the reduction of the social safety net value of land might not be as huge as expected directly following each of those two factors, depending on how the

³⁹ See for instance: Marcel Fafchamps, *Market and Institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Theory and Evidence* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004); Rajiv Sethi and E. Somanathan, "The Evolution of Social Norms in Common Property Resource Use," *The American Economic Review*, 86.4 (1996): 766-788; Alice Sindzingre, "Poverty traps: a Perspective from Development Economics," Working Paper EconomiX, No.26, 2007; Platteau 2000.

social norm of the “good and safe value” of land will evolve through time.

Conclusion

What should first be reminded from this preliminary research is that selling land rather than keeping some ownership rights on it, through various kinds of temporary exchanges, is a decision that answers to a wide variety of precepts, the importance of which depends both on households' inherent preferences and their economic situation and priorities. Any claim to have found the prime factor in choosing not to sell land would be misled. The second lesson to be drawn from our research is that the boundaries between each category of transfer that can be made by migrant households are quite blurred. The nature of the transfer will not only depend on the category under which it is referred to by the migrants – rent, use for free, sale – but also on the pre-existing relationships between the two parties of the transaction and the economic differential between both; altogether, this makes the study of the determinant of land transfer types even more troublesome.

In a general way, the field study seemed to confirm that the safety net value imbedded in land is one of the factors affecting migrants' decision to prefer renting land and loaning it for free to relatives rather than selling. We, nevertheless, have to call caution as to not reduce this land safety net function simplistically to a few realized and observable behaviors. The way for land to provide social security, and the way the perception of land as a social security influences behavior, might call upon complex notions, such as social norms and social networks, both of which are not completely understood in their relationship with economic outcomes. If this preliminary research is to lead to a more systematic empirical analysis on how the social safety net value of land can influence the land sale decision, we will have to take special care with those two last suggestions.

Finally, our research suggests that caution has to be made concerning land markets. This article underlined that land market

activity is quite low in the Northeast of Thailand, specifically land sales, even if the situation of land rights seems quite secure. We might, nonetheless, not conclude that this low turn-over rate of farm land sales in a subsistence region is a bad sign for poverty reduction, as the basic World Bank framework would have suggested. On the contrary, it might be a sign that, until an effective public social security system and secure alternative sources of income are available, potentially vulnerable households, specifically rural-urban migrants, still have access to some kind of informal social security. If households choose not to use sales to transfer land, it is not necessarily because heavy constraints prevent them to do so when they want to, but rather because not selling is the second best efficient option in their situation.

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