

Ageing farmers threaten South-East Asia's growth

Few parents want their offspring to end up working in the fields



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This month Malaysia launched new grants for young entrepreneurs. But the startup programme it has revamped is not for typical techies: it is only for people who like getting mud on their boots. Its goal is to herd more youngsters into agriculture—and Malaysia is not alone. Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand have similar agricultural schemes.

For years policymakers in South-East Asia sought to move workers from farms to factories. Now they have a different problem: people who work in agriculture are growing old. The average farmer in Malaysia is 60; in the Philippines he is 56. Taking South-East Asia as a whole, a third of all farm workers are 55 or older—up from less than a fifth a decade ago.

In some ways this reflects good trends. The region's fields are short of youngsters because so many have found better jobs in the cities. And the people left behind are living longer, because once shoddy rural health care has improved.

Yet the greying of rural residents threatens a sector that, depending on the country, still supplies 9-22% of GDP and which employs roughly 30% of all South-East Asia's workers. As farmers grow elderly, they tend to grow less productive. Creaking joints are not the only worry: older farmers are less likely to experiment with novel seed varieties or new machines. A study of Chinese farmers published in 2024 found that ageing was linked to lower productivity because older farmers were less likely to adopt new technologies.

Some governments fear that all this might endanger food supplies. South-East Asia is not short of food, says Aiko Kikkawa of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). But she warns risks to food security must be taken seriously, particularly in an era of escalating trade wars.

One fix is to ensure farmers have the right tools and are trained to be productive even as they age. Farmers in South-East Asia often work plots too small to generate capital for mechanisation. Improving access to credit or machine-rental schemes could help. So would more training.

Governments are also trying to tempt young people back to farming. That probably makes little sense and anyway would be hard to do. Jobs in cities do not only pay better; they grant higher status. Many parents are keen to stop their children getting their hands dirty: in 2020 a survey of Filipino paddy farmers found around two-thirds did not want their children to follow in their footsteps.

For agriculture to become a more appealing occupation, farms need to become bigger—to achieve scale, justify investment in machinery and generate higher incomes. In Japan the problem of ageing farmers has been tackled in part by consolidating farmland, according to research by the ADB.

That is going to be a far bigger challenge in South-East Asia, where land holdings are more fragmented to begin with. Smallholders sometimes lack pensions; they hang on to land as a hedge against unreliable social safety-nets. As fertility rates fall and life expectancy rises, other industries in South-East Asia could soon suffer the same demographic challenge. How officials manage ageing farmers will offer clues about how adeptly they are going to deal with that broader grey-shift. ■

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit, January 2026