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Agricultural commercialization in the Mekong region: A meta-narrative review and policy implications

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural commercialization has been a development focus in the Mekong region for several decades, resulting in varying outcomes. In response to competing claims and policy advice, this meta-narrative review not only examines the literature on the impacts of agricultural commercialization in the Mekong on local livelihoods, but also investigates the research traditions that shape the conceptualization of the research topics, study design, and recommended solutions. We explore narratives from three research traditions, namely the neoclassical, Marxian political economy, and neopopulist approaches. On the whole, the neoclassical literature finds positive impacts on household incomes and thus contributes to reducing poverty; the Marxian political economy tradition finds that capitalist development in agriculture creates and deepens social differentiation through which certain groups may benefit while others are negatively impacted; lastly, the neopopulist perspective finds negative impacts compared to previous, traditional livelihoods. The ideological premises informing these studies and implications for policy are discussed.

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Agricultural commercialization; Mekong; meta-narrative review; neoclassical; Marxian political economy; neopopulist

1. Introduction

The agrarian structure of the Mekong has been shaped by legacies of European colonial policies, which oriented agricultural production towards the export of commodities and raw materials; resistances, revolutions, and wars (Brocheux, 1981; Osborne, 2004); and a series of socialist-inspired experiences, which came to an end during the 1980s. Thailand was an exception in many regards. It is also the first of the five countries that, starting in the 1960s, recorded a significant increase of agricultural output resulting firstly from the territorial expansion of farmed areas, secondly from the use of Green Revolution technologies. In the same time, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar opted for socialist-in-name agricultural models, which turned into coercive practices (labor control, mandatory crops, surplus extraction, and rationing) and did not prove successful in terms of productivity nor modernization. Beginning in the 1980s, the four countries moved towards neoliberal development strategies (Castellanet & Diepart, 2015; Taylor, 2016),

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dismantled most state-farms and cooperatives, rehabilitated family-farms, and re-engaged with global markets.

Since then, the whole Mekong region is experiencing rapid and far-reaching agrarian transition that is changing the structure of national economies and impacting landscapes and livelihoods (Thompson et al., 2019). While this transition has involved marked livelihood shifts to non-farm sectors and increased in- and out-migration (Kelly, 2011; Rigg et al., 2018), agriculture nonetheless continues to play an essential role in millions of rural livelihoods. An estimated 70% of the region continues to rely directly on agriculture for their livelihoods (ADB, 2019), much of which is small-scale farming. For this majority of the population, the agrarian transition has included processes of agricultural intensification and extensification, and the increasing integration of agricultural production into market-based systems (de Koninck, 2004). While national policies have supported agricultural commercialization, its implementation is largely driven by the engagement of smallholders with commodity crops, local urban demand, and cross-border trade (Hall, 2011a). The agrarian transition has led to uneven outcomes with regards to population well-being; while the incidence of rural poverty in 2020 has fallen around 8% in Vietnam and Thailand, it is three times higher in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar (2019a, 2022a, 2022c, 2022b; World Bank, 2019b). The increasing commercialization of agriculture has been variably characterized across civic, policy, and academic debates. While proponents of increased market-oriented agricultural production associate commercialization with development, modernization, and poverty reduction, others reveal how these processes differentially impact actors or threaten the traditional, peasant moral economy (Douwe van der Ploeg, 2010; Rigg, 2012; Vandergeest, 1988). Varying perspectives have contributed to competing claims on the outcomes and impacts on local communities and contradictory policy advice regarding the management of these processes.

In response to these competing claims, we conducted a meta-narrative review to explore the various perspectives present in the literature on agricultural commercialization in the Mekong region. Specifically, our review addresses the following research questions: 1) How do the research traditions present in the agrarian studies literature conceptualize the process of agricultural commercialization and its implications in the Mekong region?; 2) What types of evidence are generated by the research traditions on impacts on local livelihoods and solutions to emerging challenges?; and 3) What policy insights can be drawn from comparing and combining findings across traditions? We understand agricultural commercialization as the processes associated with shifting of production from subsistence to market-orientation, inclusive of various forms of commercial production from household farms to the emergence of commercial estates. By using a meta-narrative review approach, we not only review the relevant evidence but also explicitly engage with the research traditions to reveal how ideological premises inform and shape study design, generated evidence, and recommended solutions.

The remainder of our paper proceeds as follows: the meta-narrative review method and materials used are described in section two; results of the review identifying research traditions and emerging narratives are presented in section three; section four contains comparison and discussion of the results; and section five concludes with policy implications.

2. Conceptual framework and methods

Within both academia and science for policy, there is increasing recognition and call for interdisciplinary research. The commonality of this call belies the complexity and challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration between varying ontological foundations (Khagram et al., 2010). Debates within the philosophies of science dispute the degree to which such collaboration is even possible. From Kuhn's scientific paradigms (1970), Lakatos' research programs (Lakatos, 1976), to Laudan's research traditions (Laudan, 1977), each of these approaches to epistemology posits the role of super theory in science. Kuhn describes this as the fundamentals over which there is scientific consensus; Lakatos calls this the negative heuristic or the 'hardcore'; and Laudan refers to a set of ontological and

methodological guidelines. These super theories provide the core theory on which further research is built. Divergence among the philosophies centers on research occurring beyond this core and its role in scientific progress. For Kuhn, multiple scientific paradigms could not exist simultaneously. Lakatos softened this stance by describing the various ‘states of health’ of research programs. Finally, Laudan fully embraces the multiplicity of research traditions, suggesting that scientists may work simultaneously in more than one, so an approach or epistemic community may draw from different research traditions.

We adopt Laudan’s concept of research tradition in our meta-narrative review, which is an emergent form of systematic review that purposefully examines different research approaches to a particular topic through engaging with research traditions. We drew on the RAMESES¹ publication standards provided by Wong et al. (2013) to review the literature on agricultural commercialization in the Mekong region, examining how research traditions inform the conceptualization of research topics, study designs, generated evidence, and resulting recommendations. Notably, a meta-narrative review is guided by principles of pragmatism, plurality, historicity, contestation, and reflexivity. Reflexivity is especially essential to meta-narrative review, requiring authors to continuously reflect on how ontological and epistemological foundations within their own disciplines may influence analysis and interpretation. Here, our team of authors is interdisciplinary, spanning economics, geography, and sociology, and are linked by commitments to in-depth field research and methodological pluralism. Drafting of this paper is the result of iterative dialogue between these disciplines, with the intention of rendering policy recommendations in collaboration with the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) project.² Reviewing the literature in this manner makes explicit the research traditions from which narratives emerge, bringing into view the ontological and methodological premises that shape studies and the resulting findings. Their comparison reveals strengths and limitations of the different traditions, as well as gaps and potential synthesis relevant to policy (Wong et al., 2013).

We conducted a search of the literature on the Web of Science database using the search terms listed in Table 1. Search terms were based on the population, intervention/exposure, comparator, and outcomes (PICO or PECO) elements commonly used to define eligibility criteria in systematic reviews. Population corresponded to the region and countries of interest, exposure to the processes of agricultural commercialization, and outcome to livelihood outcomes, including land and labor relations. We also paid specific attention to gender-based analysis and gendered outcomes for two reasons. First, gender relations are a central social cleavage in the Mekong and broad evidence suggests that gendered power shapes processes and outcomes of agrarian change (Atkinson & Errington, 1990; Hart, 1991; Park & White, 2017). Second, gender is increasingly a focus area of development agencies and state institutions in the region during the period of our review; indeed, this is a focal area of the MRLG project. We therefore expect to see this focus reflected in increased attention on gender issues within the literature sample, with different research traditions conceptualizing and analyzing gender in diverse ways (Cornwall et al., 2007; Frewer, 2017). In our analysis, we sought to understand patterns in how gender was deployed analytically across the research traditions, and the evidence presented on gendered processes and outcomes of commercialization in the region. For articles that included a gender keyword (e.g. gender, man, woman, male, female), we looked at how the authors conceptualized gender, ranging from studies that recorded gender of

Table 1. Search terms.

Theme	Search string
Population (location)	‘Mekong’ or ‘Burm*’ or ‘Cambodia*’ or ‘Lao*’ or ‘Myanmar’ or ‘Thai*’ or ‘Vietnam*’
Intervention/exposure (agricultural commercialization mechanism)	‘agricultur* commercial*’ or ‘agricultur* commoditi*’ or ‘commercial crop’ or ‘commodity crop’ or ‘land concession’ or ‘land lease’ or ‘land acquisition’ or ‘land grab’ or ‘contract farm*’ or ‘out-grower’ or ‘outgrower’
Outcome	‘effect’ or ‘impact’ or ‘livelihood’ or ‘land’ or ‘labor’ or ‘labour’ or ‘income’ or ‘employment’ or ‘job*’ or ‘wellbeing’ or ‘well-being’

respondents or attempted to include a gender balance in the methodology, to articles that understood gender as 'women,' to those that understood gender relationally, looking at the power relations between (and within groups of) men and women, poststructuralist analyses that understand gender as dynamic social constructions, to intersectional analyses that analyzed gender in relation to other categories such as race and class (see Harcourt, 2016).

The search was limited to articles in English and to the period between 1 January 2007 and 31 December 2021. Unfortunately, these limitations omit large bodies of literature on agricultural commercialization in other languages and previous years that would have an impact on the overall composition of our findings. However, this time period was selected to focus on the most recent literature that would also capture implications arising from the global financial and food price crises between 2007–2008 and potential links to the rise of attention on large-scale land acquisitions in the region.

Figure 1 depicts the review process. The initial search resulted in 1,126 records, 985 of which were peer-reviewed journal articles and retained for review. Next, the lead author screened abstracts according to the inclusion criteria listed in Table 2, further narrowing the sample to 133 articles. During the screening process, abstracts were also labeled for explicit mention of gender-based analysis. Full text review and data extraction was conducted by several authors, during which the sample was further narrowed to a total of 95 articles. Publications marked with gender-based analysis were reviewed by gender specialist authors. Data was extracted into Excel based on a predeveloped matrix of variables of interest, codifying information on research traditions, methods,

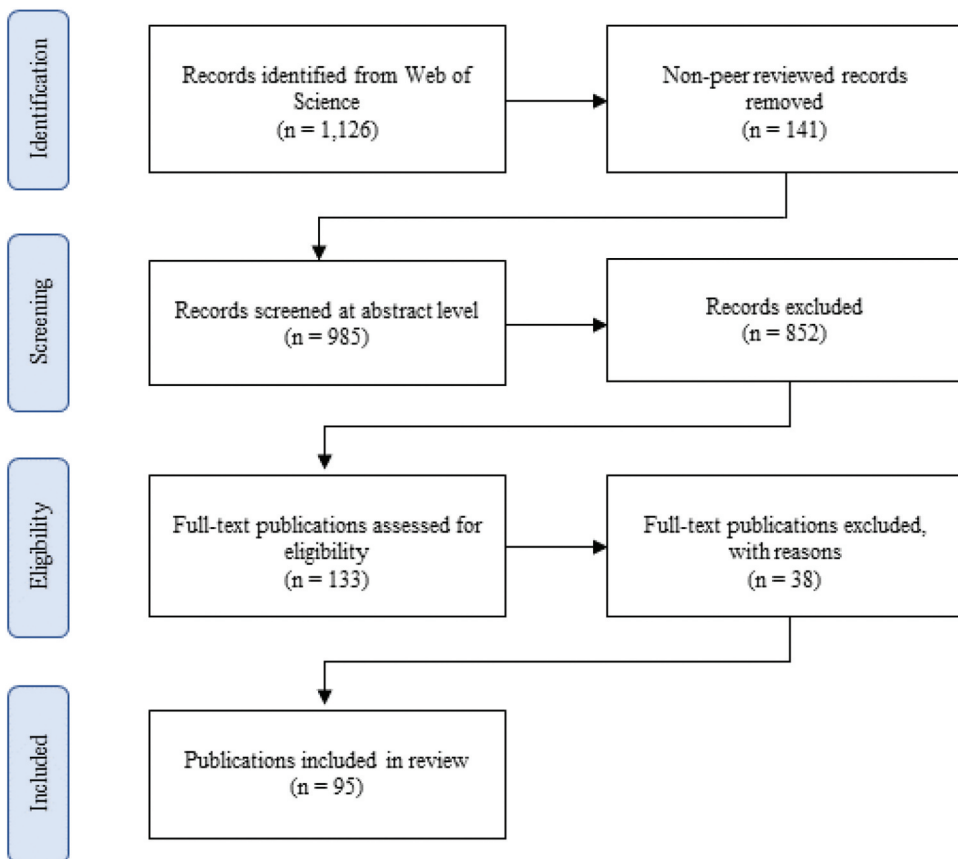


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of review process, adapted from Page et al. (2021).

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Included
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publications between 1 January 2007 and 31 December 2021 • Publications with a primary focus on the impacts of agricultural commercialization processes on rural livelihoods, land relations, and labor relations and/or solutions to arising implications • Publications with a focusing on one or more Mekong countries, including Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, Myanmar, or Vietnam • Publications that present a clear methodology, including description of primary data collection or secondary data used and analysis
Excluded
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publications focused on driving factors of agricultural commercialization, rather than impacts on local livelihoods, land relations, or labor relations • Publications on aquaculture

metrics, research areas and topics, and outcomes. Research traditions were evaluated based upon an agreed upon description of anticipated traditions, including the neoclassical, Marxian political economy, and neopopulist traditions. These descriptions are presented together with results of the analysis in section three. Merging, cleaning, and statistical descriptions of the extracted data were carried out in R version 3.6.3. Narratives were reviewed and coded manually in Excel.

3. Research traditions and narratives

3.1 Overview

A final total of 95 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included in the full-text analysis. As depicted in Table 3, most of these articles were classified as the neoclassical tradition, while a lesser number utilized a Marxian political economy or neopopulist approach. A small number of studies did not fall into these three categories. A wide array of disciplines and sub-disciplines was represented in the sample, including agriculture, forestry, economics, environmental sciences, geography, development studies, and anthropology. Research funding for the evaluated studies came from a diverse range of institutions, including universities and research centers as well as governmental development and aid funding. Notably, government funding overwhelmingly came from foreign countries, with only a small proportion of studies funded by local governments.

Figure 2 displays the publication year of the articles in our sample. There was a general increase in the number of articles published per year on agricultural commercialization within the period between 2007 and 2021. The number of articles published each year from the Marxian political economy or neopopulist research traditions remained fairly consistent throughout this period, while articles from the neoclassical tradition predominantly accounted for the growth in publications. Despite this, the Marxian political economy tradition appears to have the greatest influence within the academic literature in terms of number of times cited. The average number of times cited per article for the neoclassical (mean = 10.90; max = 51; SD = 10.64) and neopopulist (mean = 16.95; max = 52; SD = 16.59) subsamples were relatively close to the overall sample mean (15.03; SD = 20.84). The Marxian political economy tradition stood out with an average number of times cited of 24.26, a maximum number of times cited of 151, and standard deviation of 38.46. It should be noted,

Table 3. Number of articles by research tradition.

Research tradition	n
Marxian political economy	19
Neoclassical	50
Neopopulist	22
Other	4
Total	95

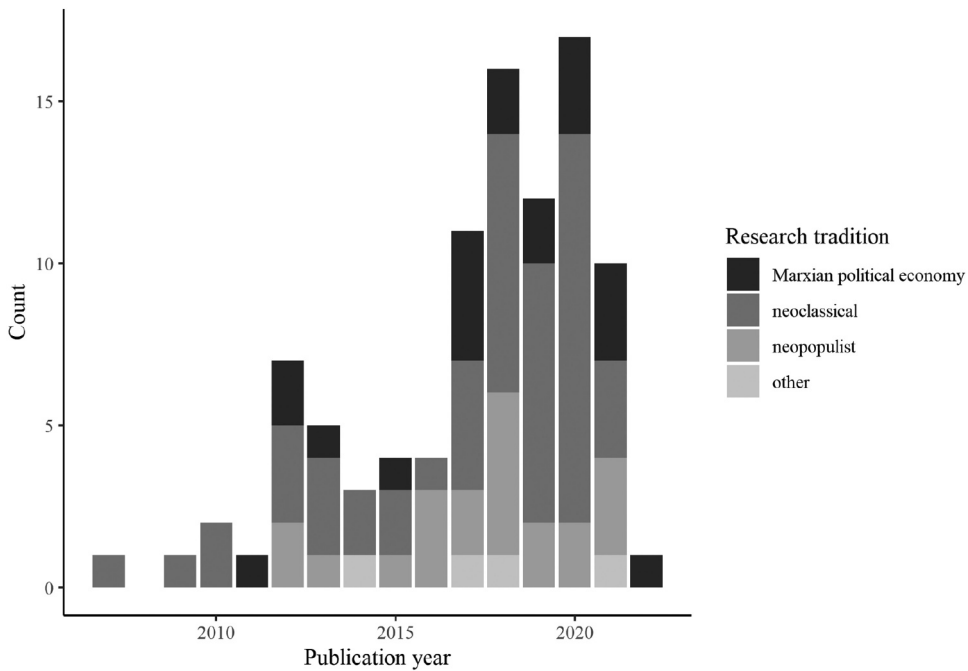


Figure 2. Number of articles by publication year, 2007–2021.

however, that differences in citation may reflect different patterns of citation between research traditions.

Smallholder-led commercialization was by far the most common commercialization type studied within the overall sample. These studies were characterized by a focus on household farms that primarily utilized family or household labor (Rigg et al., 2016), often in evaluation of transitions from subsistence to commercial farming (Alexander et al., 2017). Land concessions were the second most common commercialization type. There were significantly fewer studies related to contract farming, land leases, outgrower schemes, and state-led commercialization, indicating a gap in the literature. Vietnam and Lao PDR had the greatest representation within the sample, followed by Cambodia, and Myanmar and Thailand. Break downs of the research traditions by commercialization type and country are provided in Tables 4 and 5. A wide range of crops were studied, with plantation forests of acacia, eucalyptus, and rubber emerging as a particular focus in the literature.

Of the 95 articles, only 12 articles addressed gender relations. As few of these articles utilized gender as the primary analytical lens, we applied a broad approach to inclusion. Articles were considered to address gender if the term ‘gender’ was used to refer to relationships between people

Table 4. Research traditions by commercialization type.

Research tradition	Concession (%)*	Contract farming (%)*	Land lease (%)*	Outgrower (%)*	Smallholder (%)*	State-owned (%)*	Unspecified (%)*
Marxian political economy	7 (24%)	3 (10%)	2 (7%)	1 (3%)	15 (55%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Neoclassical	1 (2%)	7 (13%)	1 (2%)	3 (5%)	42 (76%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
Neopopulist	12 (46%)	2 (8%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)	9 (31%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Other	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	22	12	5	5	69	1	1

Note: Articles may have more than one commercialization focus.

*Within research tradition percentage.

Table 5. Research traditions by country.

Research tradition	Cambodia (%)*	Lao PDR (%)*	Myanmar (%)*	Thailand (%)*	Vietnam (%)*
Marxian political economy	5 (16%)	11 (35%)	7 (23%)	2 (6%)	5 (19%)
Neoclassical	2 (4%)	8 (16%)	1 (2%)	8 (16%)	31 (62%)
Neopopulist	9 (33%)	12 (44%)	3 (11%)	2 (7%)	2 (4%)
Other	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)
Total	17	33	12	13	40

Note: Articles may have more than one country focus.

*Within research tradition percentage.

(rather than animals or livestock), powers and/or norms, and/or the study included analysis of how commercial agriculture unevenly impacts men and women in the methodology, topic, outcomes, or proposed solutions. Articles addressing gender were all published between 2016 and 2021, indicating that the wider exclusion of gender in the literature on agricultural commercialization is only now being rectified (Park & White, 2017).

3.2 Neoclassical

In our review and analysis, we characterized articles to be from the neoclassical economics research tradition that treated farmers as rational utility maximizers who respond to incentives and price signals, reflected in the use of ‘average’ representative production functions as a methodological choice for modelling farmers’ behavior and ‘choices.’ Policy recommendations often draw from the theory of comparative advantage, advocating for lessening restrictions on free trade, eliminating price distortions due to state intervention, and enabling markets. Neoclassical agricultural economics often focuses on farm household decision-making, technology adoption, and impact on yields. Additionally, new institutional economics variants focus on agrarian institutions and their effect on efficiency and market development, such as how institutions can reduce information asymmetries and transaction costs (Kherallah & Kirsten, 2002). A more recent strand of ‘neoclassical-neopopulism’ advanced by the World Bank promotes agricultural commercialization, agri-business, as well as smallholder farmers through their integration into global value chains (Griffin et al., 2004). Due to the low- and middle-income status of Mekong countries, development (micro) economics was strongly represented in the sample, including efficiency analysis, household economics, and household risk-coping strategies for shocks.

The neoclassical research tradition, in its different variants, was the dominant approach within the overall sample, representing over half of the articles. While the majority of neoclassical studies utilized primary data, this tradition most often used a combination of secondary and primary data. These secondary data were typically sourced from national governments of study countries. The neoclassical approach tended to conceptualize gender as women, with a focus on inclusion of women as participants in empirical research, within an overall approach that could be characterized as a ‘Women in Development (WID)’ agenda, aiming to enable women to benefit equally with men from commercialization interventions (Reeves & Baden, 2000).

Common methods included household surveys or secondary data analyzed using econometric techniques. A number of studies focused on measuring the effects of a particular national policy or on comparisons between two groups of farmers, such as cooperative members and non-members, or adopters and non-adopters of certification. These studies utilized propensity score matching (Ofori et al., 2019; Tho et al., 2021) or various regression analyses, such as linear or probit models (Pham et al., 2019; Schipmann & Qaim, 2010). One study used a randomized control trial (Saenger et al., 2014). The majority of these studies focused on household income as their primary outcome indicator. Financial analysis was also commonly used to assess the viability or profitability of various models of production; measures used included net present value, internal rate of return, and net

profit. Mixed methods studies typically combined these quantitative techniques with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. The majority of the neoclassical articles had a short-term focus, with 29 studies examining a period within a single season. Others examined periods over a small number of seasons, with only one study utilizing time series. This may be a reflection of the lack of long-term data sets.

The neoclassical subsample focused largely on smallholder-led commercialization. Five primary neoclassical narratives emerged from the neoclassical literature on agricultural commercialization within the Mekong region. The first two narratives document the effects of agricultural commercialization among smallholder farmers. First, there is substantial evidence that the adoption and cultivation of cash crops positively contributes to increased household income or other economic indicators of farm performance. This was documented among a wide variety of agricultural crops and livestock (Cazzuffi et al., 2020; Choenkwan & Rambo, 2018; Schipmann & Qaim, 2010, 2011), although the majority of evidence emerged from investigations of forest plantations of acacia and eucalyptus, encouraged by forestry promotion policies, such as Vietnam's Greening the Barren Hills and Five Million Hectare Reforestation programs (Boulay et al., 2013; Cuong et al., 2020; Khuc et al., 2020; Maraseni et al., 2018; Nghiem et al., 2020; Phimmavong & Keenan, 2020; Sandewall et al., 2010, 2015; Tham et al., 2020). However, this effect was most prominent among wealthy and average income households, and consistently associated with factors such as secure land tenure and land holding size, raising implications for poverty reduction efforts and rising inequality. Poorer households were less likely to benefit from commercialization due to the high initial required investment, smaller land holdings that lack efficiencies of scale, and in the case of tree plantations, the ability to forgo income during long maturation periods. Second, food security in terms of dietary diversity was found to increase with agricultural commercialization due to growing incomes. Food security is a primary concern associated with the transition from subsistence to commercialized smallholder production. However, neoclassical studies have found that the purchase of food from markets facilitated by higher incomes plays an important role in enhancing dietary diversity (Parvathi, 2018; Timler et al., 2020).

The remaining three neoclassical narratives revolve around improving the agricultural commercialization process. The third narrative addresses barriers to entry into commercial agricultural production for smallholders, particularly access to credit and markets. Credit structures typically favor higher income households and the use of collateral, excluding lower income households (Luan & Kingsbury, 2019; Luan, 2019). Further, transaction costs and market uncertainties hinder smallholder participation in modern markets and supply chains (Pham et al., 2019). In particular, it was found that women face multiple constraints to participation and benefit from commercialization, including labor burden, capital shortage, poor market access, and limited knowledge and skills (Ha et al., 2016). The neoclassical literature proposes collective action on the part of farmers to overcome these barriers and increase bargaining power, mainly through agricultural cooperatives and contract farming. Studies evaluating the efficacy of cooperatives found positive facilitation of access to credit, information, and markets, and reduction of overall transaction costs, although participation had varied impacts on household income (Ofori et al., 2019; Pham et al., 2019). Collective action through farmer groups that include women-headed households were found to enhance women's ability to obtain bargaining power, credit, and information, but these groups require technical and institutional support from government and private sector partners (Ha et al., 2016). Contract farming was similarly found to improve access to markets and investment, but were also observed to be biased towards larger farms and could contribute to worsened gender inequality due to uneven access to information and land and resource rights between men and women (Ba et al., 2019; Dong et al., 2019).

The fourth neoclassical narrative advances the benefits of smallholder adoption of particular farming practices or technologies. Studies in the sample examined a wide variety of practices, including mechanization, organic farming, high-yielding varieties and breeds, and reduced fertilization use, finding positive impacts on yield and/or household profits (Alexander et al., 2017; Doanh

et al., 2018; Gummert et al., 2020; Lemke et al., 2007; Lienhard et al., 2014; Stuart et al., 2018; Stür et al., 2013). Additionally, farmer characteristics associated with adoption were found to include educational attainment, cooperative membership, and livelihood dependency of agricultural activities (Kong & Castella, 2021; Tho et al., 2021). Notably, this narrative was strongly associated with agricultural and sustainability research fields; many of these studies evaluated economic household outcomes in tandem with agricultural or environmental indicators.

The fifth and final neoclassical narrative focuses on the efficacy of product certification. Various forms of certification for agricultural and forestry products have been promoted as a means to ensure economic and environmental sustainability of production processes as well as to establish premium prices for producers. Evidence from the Mekong region has focused largely on sustainable forestry through the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), though other crops such as green tea have also been examined. While certification has been shown to result in premium prices for final products, studies have also revealed that this is not sufficient to offset increased labor costs and fees associated with certification (Tran & Goto, 2019), which has also been found more widely (Oya et al., 2018). In the case of FSC membership, growers were found to benefit when membership costs are borne by donors or external agencies (Auer, 2012; Cochard et al., 2021; Frey et al., 2018; Ling et al., 2018; Maraseni et al., 2017).

3.3 *Marxian agrarian political economy*

The Marxian political economy research tradition offers a critical analysis of capitalism and its contradictions, reflected in both its progressive and exploitative character. In the more 'orthodox' versions of agrarian political economy, economic development involves capitalist development in agriculture and the transition from agriculture to industrialization. Yet while capitalist development in agriculture is dynamic, driving progress and contributing to higher standards of living in the long term, it is simultaneously brutal and exploitative (Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2010). Scholarship within this tradition often focuses on historical questions of agrarian change and power dynamics between classes, describing different transition paths and differentiation processes. Social differentiation in agriculture, seen as a core feature of agrarian transitions, manifests itself in the development of proto-capitalist farmers from the ranks of landlords or peasants, and concomitant processes of proletarianization, which often remains incomplete insofar as wage-dependent households still cling to limited land.

Studies from the Marxian agrarian political economy tradition accounted for 19 articles or one-fifth of the overall sample. Qualitative and mixed methods were favored equally, while only two articles were purely quantitative. The majority of Marxian political economy studies relied on primary data collection, utilizing in-depth or semi-structured interviews, often coupled with household surveys and/or focus group discussions. Only one Marxian political economy study utilized secondary data. This reflects the fact that researchers in this tradition often ask questions that cannot be simply answered by analysis of official statistics and other secondary data sources. In-depth case studies, comparative analysis, and historical perspective were also observed. Compared to the neoclassical research tradition, Marxian political economists utilized a wider set of measures in their investigation. Outcomes were also often measured through household income, although this was augmented by disaggregation of on- and off-farm income, and consideration of wages and working conditions. Other measures included access to resources, particularly land tenure, dispossession, and distribution, indices of changing social and power relations, and implications of social differentiation. The timeframe of Marxian political economy studies was most often medium in length, spanning a number of years, rather than cross-sectional snapshots characteristics of the neoclassical tradition; notably six articles investigated long-term impacts spanning generations. While most articles in this tradition focused on class and social relations, five articles considered gender dynamics and their interplay with class and ethnicity. The analytical approach focused on

how commercialization shaped gendered power intersectionally with class, particularly focusing on the relationships within households and shifts in labor and non-farm livelihoods.

The majority of Marxian political economy studies concluded with a mix of both positive and negative impacts, thereby reflecting the inherent contradictions of agricultural commercialization processes. Five studies found exclusively negative impacts, while only three studies found exclusively positive impacts. The intersectional approach to analyzing class and gender together led to authors critiquing mainstream development approaches to gender empowerment, which they contend sees rural indigenous women as a homogenous group abstracted from socio-political context, thus obscuring the way in which capitalist relations are transforming the relationship between different groups of people, land, and capital (Frewer, 2017; Gironde et al., 2021).

Most studies from the Marxian political economy tradition also focused on smallholder-led agriculture commercialization; however, there was a wider spread across other forms with an emphasis also on land concessions. Contract farming, land leases, and outgrower schemes were also considered. The Marxian political economy literature is underpinned by one overarching thread: outcomes of agricultural commercialization are contingent upon various, historically specific factors that lead to differentiated outcomes for different groups. Emphasis is placed on the transformation of these factors over time and how their arrangement facilitates agrarian accumulation from above or below or lack thereof. This is supported by three narratives that revolve around power and its permutations in social, property, and labor relations. Each of these aspects are highly interrelated, influencing and being influenced by each other, as well as being historically contingent at multiple scales.

The first narrative focuses on social relations and its role in determining outcomes of agricultural commercialization. This includes social relations within and among farmer groups. Factors include differentiated wealth, social and political connections, and especially the ownership and usage of land. Better-off households are more able to benefit from commercialization processes and to cope with its adverse implications, i.e. they are less affected by 'adverse incorporation' into global value chains. Not only do they have the means to invest in commercialization, manage weather fluctuations and variability, and often have larger land holdings, they are also better positioned to benefit from customary tenure and to defend their land tenure from dispossession. Studies from Lao PDR, for example, have documented how national policies of resettlement and village consolidation have engendered uneven access to land and power asymmetries. Communities that settled early were able to mobilize political connections to solidify customary tenure claims against state territorialization attempts (Kramp et al., 2022) and dispossession by concessions (Suhardiman et al., 2015). Wealthier households also increased their incomes through engaging in commercial agriculture, such as rubber or other tree plantations, while poorer households were more likely to lose land, experience negative net agricultural production, face food insecurity, and engage in wage labor or small scale trading as alternative livelihoods (Junquera & Grêt-Regamey, 2020; Suhardiman et al., 2015; van der Meer Simo et al., 2020). Thus, although some households are able to benefit, the process of agricultural commercialization further deepens and exacerbates existing social differentiation among farmers.

Social differentiation was also observed between farmers and other actors, and is closely linked to the second Marxian political economy narrative on property relations. In certain cases, historical specificities have led to the concentration of land holdings and the emergence of elite landlord and agrarian capitalist classes, such as those documented in Cambodia and Myanmar. In Cambodia, an elite class of landlords held power and unequal access to politico-legal authority to derive surplus from migrant tenants, furthering their capital accumulation (Beban & Gorman, 2017). In Myanmar, remnants from the British colonial era resulted in domination of agricultural production by medium and large-landholders, coupled with high rates of landlessness (Vicol & Pritchard, 2021). In both cases, poor peasants were excluded from production and accumulation. These dynamics are furthered by modern institutional decisions and policies. The governments of Thailand and Vietnam, for

example, made conscious institutional decisions to support smallholder rubber production, linked to on-going land reform policies. Experience in Thailand demonstrates the viability for smallholder production to generate accumulation and contribute to poverty reduction. Conversely, in Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Myanmar, government agencies have favored commercial estates through concession of land to investors, faced with which smallholders struggle to maintain control of their land and access to livelihood resources (Fox & Castella, 2013).

These shifting property relations, leading to dispossession and landlessness, in turn are connected to the third narrative on shifting labor relations. In some cases of coercive dispossession, such as through land concessions documented in Lao PDR, dispossessed peasants are semi-proletarianized, entering into wage employment in emerging capitalist estates. This early stage of proletarianization is associated with poor wages and working conditions, increased precarity, and food insecurity (Dao, 2018; Kenney Lazar, 2012). Access to wage labor was also found to be differentiated by gender, with women farm laborers reported to be paid less than men in Myanmar (Belton & Filipski, 2019), Vietnam (Dao, 2018) and Cambodia (Gironde et al., 2021), while women's access to non-agricultural labor is also limited (Frewer, 2017). Gironde et al. (2021) found that women in Cambodia suffered discrimination from employers because they are considered physically weaker or less able to work with machinery, although the authors also note that women are progressively taking on new income earning roles.

Additionally, shifting labor relations are reflected in increased migration, particularly of landless populations. Migration is gendered, with research from Myanmar finding that both men and women engage in long-term migration, while short-term migration is predominantly a male activity (Belton & Filipski, 2019). This includes domestic and international migration for wage employment in urban areas, but also for on-farm wage employment with expanding family farms as well as commercial estates (Hall, 2011b). In Myanmar especially, remittances from migration are central to livelihoods, challenging the expectation that commercial agriculture would predominantly drive poverty reduction in rural areas (Belton & Filipski, 2019; Vicol & Pritchard, 2021).

3.4 Neopopulism

The neopopulist approach does not strictly conform to the notion of 'research tradition' as in the case of neoclassical economics and Marxian agrarian political economy, because it may derive research questions, methods and assumptions from both. Byres (2004, p. 19) considers it a 'development ideology' that has at its origins Chayanov's work, 'invoking of utility maximization and the marginal calculus of the peasant household,' thus close to the neoclassical tradition. Borras (2023, p. 19) more recently notes 'neopopulist' as a 'pejorative term that became attached to one type of radical agrarian political economy,' thus close to the Marxian tradition. As an ideological project, neopopulism partly derives from the classical populist's return to pre-capitalist, artisanal household or family production and pre-capitalist social relations. The focus of this tradition lies on social and cultural issues, rather than productivity, highlighting the ills of capitalism. There is advocacy for the protection and preservation of the peasantry and smallholder livelihoods, who are typically undifferentiated, from the ravages of neoliberal capitalism. A neo-Chayanovian version of neopopulism, exemplified by Lipton (2006) and many contemporary advocates of small-scale peasant farming (van der Ploeg, 2013), extols the virtues of small-scale farmers both in terms of farming efficiency and environmental protection, following the basic principle of Chayanov's work on the potential for small-scale farmer cooperatives (Bernstein, 2009). Neopopulist narratives therefore reflect two distinct traditions. On the one hand, technical neopopulism argues that smallholder production is more productive than other forms and, more recently, also more environmentally sustainable. This is the variant of neopopulism that is closer to neoclassical agricultural economics in terms of analytical tools, leading Byres (2004) to coin the term 'neoclassical neopopulism.' On the other hand, political neopopulism is rights-based; aligning with social justice movements, this perspective argues that peasants have the right to existence and to land, regardless of productivity

considerations, an interpretation that may methodologically draw from agrarian political economy and brings it closer to the emerging field of 'critical agrarian studies.'³

Articles from the neopopulist research tradition represented just over one-fifth of the overall sample. The majority of studies utilized qualitative methods, followed by mixed methods; only one study used purely quantitative methods. Similar to the neoclassical and Marxian political economy traditions, qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys were the most common methods used within the neopopulist tradition, often used in combination. A notable departure, however, was the more frequent use of ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, and unstructured and in-depth conversations. Mapping, including remote sensing, GIS, and participatory mapping, and document review were also observed. Further contrasting with the neoclassical and Marxian political economy traditions, impacts of agricultural commercialization were not primarily measured by household income within the neopopulist subsample. Greater emphasis was placed on livelihood preservation, particularly changing access to land and other resources, impacts on food security, and working conditions in the cases of wage employment. Studies from the neopopulist tradition had timeframes balanced between short and medium length, with a small number of studies investigating generational length outcomes. Outcomes measured by the neopopulist subsample were largely negative, with some cases of both mixed and positive impacts.

Neopopulist articles with a gender focus tended to conceptualize gender through a post-structural lens, working with a relational understanding of the ways in which gender is dynamic, shaping and shaped by social and ecological change. The longer temporal dimension of several studies enabled a view of shifting gender relations over time, including an understanding of gender relations prior to processes of commercialization under study, thus tracing how complex gendered social norms and power relations shaped the effects of commercialization. Kusakabe and Myae (2019), for example, looked at how gender relations shift in diverse processes of commercialization, and found that women were vulnerable prior to rubber booms in all their study areas as they lacked rights to resources and decision-making power.

In contrast with the neoclassical and the Marxian political economy research traditions, the neopopulist tradition focused primarily on land concessions, with a secondary focus on smallholder-led commercialization. This focus partly reflects the fact that this tradition is not necessarily opposed to smallholder commercialization as long as it is not on adverse terms, but decries land dispossession driven by corporate interests. The fundamental underpinning of the neopopulist literature in the Mekong region rests on the superiority and desirability of traditional livelihood systems. Narratives originating from this point of departure highlight the adverse impacts resulting from both smallholder-led and concession-based commercialization. Four distinct narratives emerge. First, smallholder-led commercialization through the adoption of commodity crops has led to adverse socioeconomic impacts as well as environmental degradation. Cultivation of commodity crops, such as maize, integrates farmers into markets for seeds and other inputs. In Myanmar, where maize has been promoted by the government and companies as an alternative to opium, this incorporation has led to indebtedness and landlessness (Woods, 2020). Integration into global markets also exposes smallholders to increased vulnerability to market failures (Hought et al., 2012). Expanding commodity crops also alter access to land and land relations, increasing pressure and competition. This has been linked to increasing land clearance and deforestation, as well as disruption of previous 'land-sharing' arrangements and multifunctional land uses, such as swidden agriculture (Hought et al., 2012; Jepsen et al., 2019; Vongvisouk et al., 2016). These risks of commercial agriculture are reflected in the persistence of smallholder farming for subsistence in spite of its unprofitability, in which farmers prioritize food security and diversification over profit maximization (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Second, land concessions, particularly large-scale acquisitions, disrupt local livelihood systems and adversely impact local communities. Notably, these studies focused primarily on Lao PDR and Cambodia. Studies on concessions focused on forest plantations, in particular rubber, in contrast with the neoclassical focus on smallholder acacia and eucalyptus (see [Appendix A](#)). These negative

impacts stem from dispossession of resources or resettlement, including land for subsistence production of primarily rice, as well as communal resources, such as forests for the collection of non-timber forest products as sources of food (Drbohlav & Hejkrlik, 2018; Friis et al., 2016; Nanhthavong et al., 2021; Scheidel et al., 2013). Environmental and health impacts resulting from intensified commercial production were also raised, with former land users concerned for their personal health as well as the ability to restore the land after investors depart (Friis & Nielsen, 2016). There is documented loss of subsistence self-sufficiency and resiliency, coupled with an increased dependency on markets for food and/or income and the loss of indigenous identity and breakdown of social institutions (Hennings, 2018; Scheidel et al., 2013). This aversion to dependency extends to wage labor and the third narrative on proletarianization. Studies documented worker dissatisfaction with their employment compared to previous occupations due to lower incomes, job insecurity and inconsistency, and poor working conditions, challenging the notion that land concessions contribute to rural development and poverty reduction (Drbohlav & Hejkrlik, 2018; Friis et al., 2016; McAllister, 2015; Nanhthavong, 2021; Souphonphacdy et al., 2012). Further, a study in Myanmar and Lao PDR found that in communities dispossessed of land by large rubber plantations, women became more dependent on male remittances from wage work elsewhere (Kusakabe & Myae, 2019).

The fourth and final neopopulist narrative concerns peasant resistance against land concessions. Local resistance against land concessions and dispossession occurs in multiple forms with varying degrees of success. Instances in Lao PDR and Cambodia documented individual, collective, and organized forms of resistance. This included everyday peasant resistance in small acts of defiance, rightful resistance through appeals of 'good' citizenship, and exploitation of contradictory internal politics. Lamb et al. (2017) highlighted the role of women and their gain in power in informal community activism resisting plantations, but also found that men later reasserted power in formal governance. The various acts of resistance were variably successful, enabling the reclamation of previously conceded land, prevention of concession expansion, and the cancellation of planned plantations (Baird, 2017; Kenney Lazar et al., 2018; Kenney Lazar, 2018; McAllister, 2015).

4. Discussion

Considering each of the research traditions' narratives, three very different conclusions emerge on the impacts of agricultural commercialization. Table 6 provides a summary of comparison between the three traditions. These varying and contradictory conclusions are underpinned by the differing ontological and epistemological foundations between traditions. We explore these foundations further in this section and how they shape the studies, evidence, and recommendations on agricultural commercialization in the Mekong region. Moreover, it is undeniable that the three research traditions have vastly different degrees of influence on policy. The neoclassical tradition coupled with neoliberal thinking became, 'standard in conventional international economic policy circles,' since the 1980s (Peet & Hartwick, 2009, p. 84). National and agricultural development policies throughout the Mekong are no exception, reflecting a large number of the key tenets of the Washington Consensus, including trade liberalization, encouragement of foreign direct investment, privatization, and deregulation (see Appendix B). This raises implications regarding which narratives carry political weight, and why.

The neoclassical tradition is fundamentally rooted in methodological individualism. This is reflected in the literature's overwhelming focus on smallholder-led commercialization and the use of individual farming households as the unit of analysis. The focus on contract farming maintains this individualism, coupled with a focus on reducing transaction costs stemming from the conceptual preferences of the new institution economics variant. Analytical focus was placed on individual characteristics associated with particular outcomes or behaviors, and assessment through quantitative, statistical methods. The limited focus on on-farm dynamics neglects the role of non- and off-farm activities and actors prevalent in livelihood systems, and the short-term temporal scope of studies precluded examination of longer-term dynamics. Significantly, the neoclassical perspective

Table 6. Summary of research tradition comparison.

Comparative category	Marxian political economy	Neoclassical	Neopopulist
Commercialization types	Smallholders; concessions	Smallholders; contract farming	Concessions; smallholders
Country focus	Lao PDR; Myanmar	Vietnam; Thailand	Lao PDR; Cambodia
Topical focus	Social differentiation; historical perspective	Household income; individual behavior	Changes to traditional livelihoods
Methods	Qualitative; mixed	Quantitative; mixed	Qualitative; mixed
Scale	Household; village	Household	Village; district
Temporal scope	Medium to long	Short	Short to medium
Outcomes of commercial agriculture	Differentiated outcomes for different groups	Positive impact on household income; potential increases in inequality	Negative impact on traditional livelihoods and wellbeing
Levers of change	Just social and property/land relations	Modification to individual behavior; reduction of barriers to market and transaction costs	Access to land protection of land rights
Primary change agents	Not specified	Smallholders	Peasant resistance to negotiate land and labor relations
Policy recommendations	Increasing understanding of power dynamics and their context to reveal 'hidden costs' to inform policy-making.	Improve agricultural commercialization by removing barriers, increasing adoption, and enhancing benefits.	Protect land rights, maintain traditional livelihoods; balance socioeconomic and environmental concerns over crop productivity
Gaps	Concrete solutions; gendered intersections with class in wage and unwaged/care labor	Land concessions and leases; long term impacts; power dynamics; impacts of proletarianization	Gendered power relations recognizing diversity of women; gender divisions prior to commercialization

was the predominant representation of social science in agronomic or other technical studies combined with microeconomic analysis.

In the literature, the Marxian political economy and neopopulist traditions had a greater focus on power, dispossession, resistance, and land relations. Both of these traditions were more likely to use qualitative or mixed methods, had wider analytical focuses, and longer temporal scope. This allowed these traditions to capture broader livelihood systems change than the neoclassical approach. There was a greater focus on concession-based commercialization, particularly within the neopopulist approach, which focused on threats to traditional livelihoods. Notably, the neopopulist tradition was most commonly associated with geographical studies tracking land use and land cover change, focusing on deforestation and 'boom crop' trends. The Marxian political economy focus on relations revealed the impacts of land redistribution and changes in relative wealth and power. This wider analytical lens in the Marxian political economy and neopopulist traditions allowed for a more dynamic engagement with questions of gender, considering how changes in one sphere, such as access to agricultural wage labor and control over cash incomes, impacted gender relations in other spheres, such as power relations within the household and community.

On the whole, the relatively narrow focus of the neoclassical literature finds that agricultural commercialization results in positive economic outcomes for farming households, and extrapolates to conclude positive overall contribution to poverty reduction. The tradition acknowledges barriers faced by women and other groups to equally participate and benefit in these processes, and thus the primary policy and development objective is then to increase and improve agricultural commercialization through the removal of barriers, increased adoption, and enhancing benefits. Recommendations maintain the focus on the individual, resting mostly on farmers in modifying behaviors or practices, such as improving product quality and price through adoption of high-yielding varieties or diversification, and reducing transaction costs and increasing access through

collective action. Options to improve gender inequality include policies supporting the production of agricultural tools and devices specifically to support women's on-farm labor (Ha et al., 2016). The issue of land is recognized only in that land holding size enables or inhibits household benefits from agricultural commercialization processes, and recommendations are focused on policies promoting the inclusion of households with smaller land holding size.

The Marxian political economy tradition, on the other hand, finds that the process of agricultural commercialization or capitalist development in agriculture creates and deepens social differentiation through which certain groups, including differentiated groups of women, may benefit while others are negatively impacted. These divergent impacts lead to changes in agrarian structures, with important distributional consequences. Recommendations tend to focus on increasing understanding of these dynamics and their context to reveal 'hidden costs' (Suhardiman et al., 2015) of these processes, including gender implications, to inform policy-making and shift power, including gendered power, in state institutions, companies, and households (Frewer, 2017), but does not engage in technical solutions. Land is a central theme in the Marxian political economy perspective as the basis of property relations and the means of production.

The neopopulist perspective overall finds negative impacts of agricultural commercialization compared to previous, traditional livelihoods, with an emphasis on particularly vulnerable categories such as women and ethnic minorities. Policy recommendations are focused on protecting smallholder land rights and maintaining traditional livelihoods, often as alternative to or in conjunction with proletarianization, and balancing socioeconomic and environmental concerns over crop productivity. Feminist approaches to the right to food are also advanced, focusing on women's autonomy and agency through participation at all levels to ensure accountability of actors; foregrounding social rights; and building networks and non-legal approaches alongside legal rights approaches (Bourke Martignoni, 2021). Further, peasant resistance features prominently as a method to negotiate both land and labor relations. In the neopopulist perspective, access to land and land rights is central to local livelihoods.

By maintaining ontological and methodological focus on the individual, subsequent recommendations emerging from the neoclassical tradition limit the role of pro-active institutional interventions for agrarian transformations, thereby reinforcing neoliberal ideals of lessened state intervention and deregulation. Further, the dominance of neoclassical recommendations in policy ignores entrenched and deepening inequalities revealed by the Marxian political economy tradition, allowing for the reproduction of existing distributions of power or further elite capture. Finally, the prioritization of commercial agriculture over traditional livelihoods has been mobilized towards efforts to ensure national unity and political stability.

5. Conclusion and policy implications

Foremost, this meta-narrative review highlights the plurality of approaches to research on agricultural commercialization in the Mekong region. The purpose of our analysis is not to champion one approach over another, but rather to reveal the manner in which ideological premises behind research traditions inform and shape study design, generated evidence, and recommended solutions. Awareness and understanding these premises can help policymakers navigate evidence and claims based on their priorities, and to be contentious of extrapolations where evidence is lacking. Additionally, it is important to be cognizant of which actors and institutions benefit from different narratives, given their varied dominance and mobilization in policy discourse. Our analysis additionally demonstrates the diversity of evidence generated by the various research traditions and the potential blind spots that would result from prioritizing one perspective over another. In particular, a diversity of focuses, farming and livelihood systems approaches, and temporal scales provides a more extensive understanding of the implications of agricultural commercialization and its outcomes. Given the neoclassical leaning of national policy in the region, we therefore recommend policymakers broaden the forms of evidence considered in planning and decision-making. Further, the varied outcomes and experiences observed by the three research

traditions underscore the diverse and context-specific ways agricultural commercialization impacts different groups. This context must be taken into account when tailoring recommendations to local needs.

Finally, we uncovered a number of gaps for future research resulting from the topical and country focuses of the various traditions. The division in commercialization processes between Thailand and Vietnam on the one hand, and Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar on the other, has previously been noted in the literature and attributed to variations in agrarian structure and national policy (Byerlee, 2014; Fox & Castella, 2013). Additional research is needed on alternative and emergent models, such as contract farming and land leases. Attention to power relations and gender norms should also be key in designing and implementing solutions for commercial agriculture.

Notes

1. RAMSES: Realist And MEta-narrative Evidence Syntheses: Evolving Standards.
2. See acknowledgements for funding details.
3. For a comprehensive and authoritative discussion of 'critical agrarian studies,' see Borras (2023).

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Appendices

Appendix A. Number of articles by commercialization type, research tradition, and crop

Commercialization type	Research tradition	Cassava	Forestry (acacia, eucalyptus, and other)	Fruits & vegetables	Livestock	Maize	Other/ unspecified	Oil palm	Rice	Rubber
Concession	Marxian political economy	2	1	0	0	0	2	0	2	6
	Neoclassical	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neopopulist	0	4	0	0	0	3	1	0	9
	Other	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	Sub-total	3	6	0	0	0	5	1	2	17
Contract	Marxian political economy	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	3
	Neoclassical	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0
	Neopopulist	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sub-total	2	4	0	2	1	2	1	3	3
Lease	Marxian political economy	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	1
	Neoclassical	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neopopulist	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sub-total	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	1
Outgrower	Marxian political economy	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Neoclassical	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
	Neopopulist	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sub-total	2	3	0	0	1	0	1	1	2
Smallholder	Marxian political economy	2	4	0	0	0	8	1	5	5
	Neoclassical	1	18	4	5	3	13	2	8	2
	Neopopulist	2	1	0	0	2	3	0	0	2
	Other	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Sub-total	5	24	4	5	5	25	3	13	10
State	Marxian political economy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neoclassical	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neopopulist	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sub-total	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unspecified	Marxian political economy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neoclassical	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neopopulist	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sub-total	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0

Appendix B. Summary of agricultural elements of national socioeconomic development plans in the Mekong

Country	Strategic document	Agricultural sector targets	Agricultural exports	Agricultural investments
Cambodia	National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2019–2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen the role of agricultural sector in job creation, food security, poverty reduction, and rural development Target 5% crop production growth and 7% export growth per annum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve product quality and trade facilitation to increase exports Accelerating Inclusive Markets for Smallholders via domestic and export markets, bilateral trade agreements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote investments in research and development for higher value-added crops, livestock and aquaculture; agricultural financial and insurance products; investment in processing of agro-commodities; phytosanitary, irrigation and rural infrastructure Support investment in smallholder rubber and processing
Lao PDR	National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) 2021–2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adoption of high yielding technologies Growth of agricultural sector by 2.5% Shift towards sustainable green growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agricultural exports to reach US\$1.2b per year Ensure close links between agriculture and processing to serve domestic and export markets Promote diversified, Global Agricultural Practices (GAP) and organic practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve access to finance; promote production groups and cooperatives Upgrade technology for clean and safe practices Increase value addition and linkages to industrial sector for processing
Myanmar	Myanmar Agriculture Development Strategy and Investment Plan 2018–2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted impacts include improved food security and nutrition, poverty reduction, competitiveness, rural income, and strengthened farmers' land rights Agricultural growth 4%; increase land and labour productivity by 50% (GDP/ha) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase agricultural export value by 40% Streamline import and export processes and link to ASEAN single-window system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase investment to agri-food sector by 40% and agribusiness share of GDP Promote farmer associations and marketing, access to finance, and insurance Clarify, register, and secure smallholder land rights Streamline contract farming procedures and value-chain models Expedite investment applications and encourage responsible investment
Thailand	National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) 2017–2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support sustainable agriculture for comply with climate change commitments and land use potential Expand opportunities for farmers to access land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve agricultural exports by strengthening supply chain linkages across sectors Leverage advanced technologies to build competitiveness Facilitate trade and investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage farmer collaboration with cooperatives, partnerships and commercial companies to achieve economies of scale Increase access to finance and microfinance

(Continued)

Country	Strategic document	Agricultural sector targets	Agricultural exports	Agricultural investments
Vietnam	Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) 2021–2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overall GDP growth 7%, emphasising industry and digital economy• Reduce agricultural labour to 25% of the population	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expand and diversify export markets• Effectively utilize Free Trade Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Integration with global value chains; product and origin certification• Promote agricultural restructuring and investment towards large-scale commodity agriculture, value-addition, and climate smart, high-tech production