

Less Poverty, More Precarity: squaring the circle of Southeast Asian development

#LSESEADevelopment

Professor Jonathan Rigg

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Hosted by the LSE Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre

Less Poverty, More Precarity: Squaring the Circle of Southeast Asian Development

Jonathan Rigg
School of Geographical Sciences
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Northeast Thailand, 1982



The puzzle of poverty I

In 1966, the CIA , worried about the growth of the Communist Party of Thailand commissioned a study of living standards in the Northeastern region.

The study found that 78% of rural Northeasterners had a cash income of just US\$15 per year.

But “most villagers rated themselves ‘reasonably well off’.”

(This surprised the CIA.)

(CIA 1967: 5).

Northeast Thailand, 1982



Northeast Thailand, 2008



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The puzzle of poverty II

In 2012-2013 we surveyed households in three villages in Khon Kaen province.

We found that 46 per cent of household head respondents considered their households to be 'poor' or 'very poor'.

(We were not altogether surprised.)

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Meagre living but not poor



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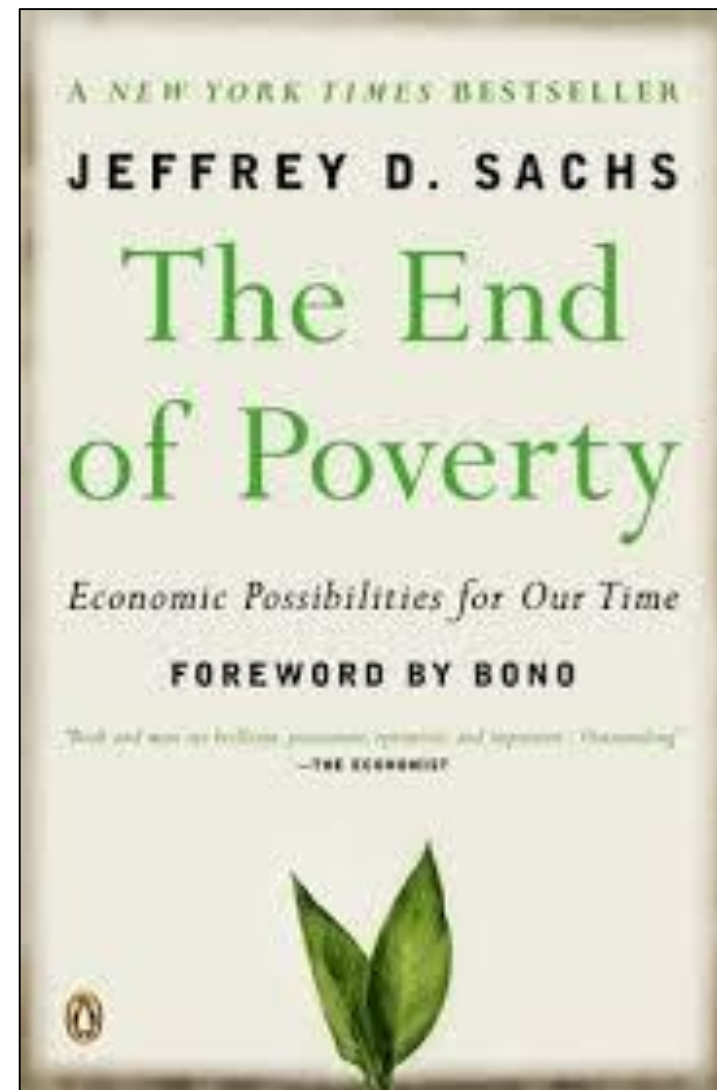
Material wealth but poor



The idea of poverty

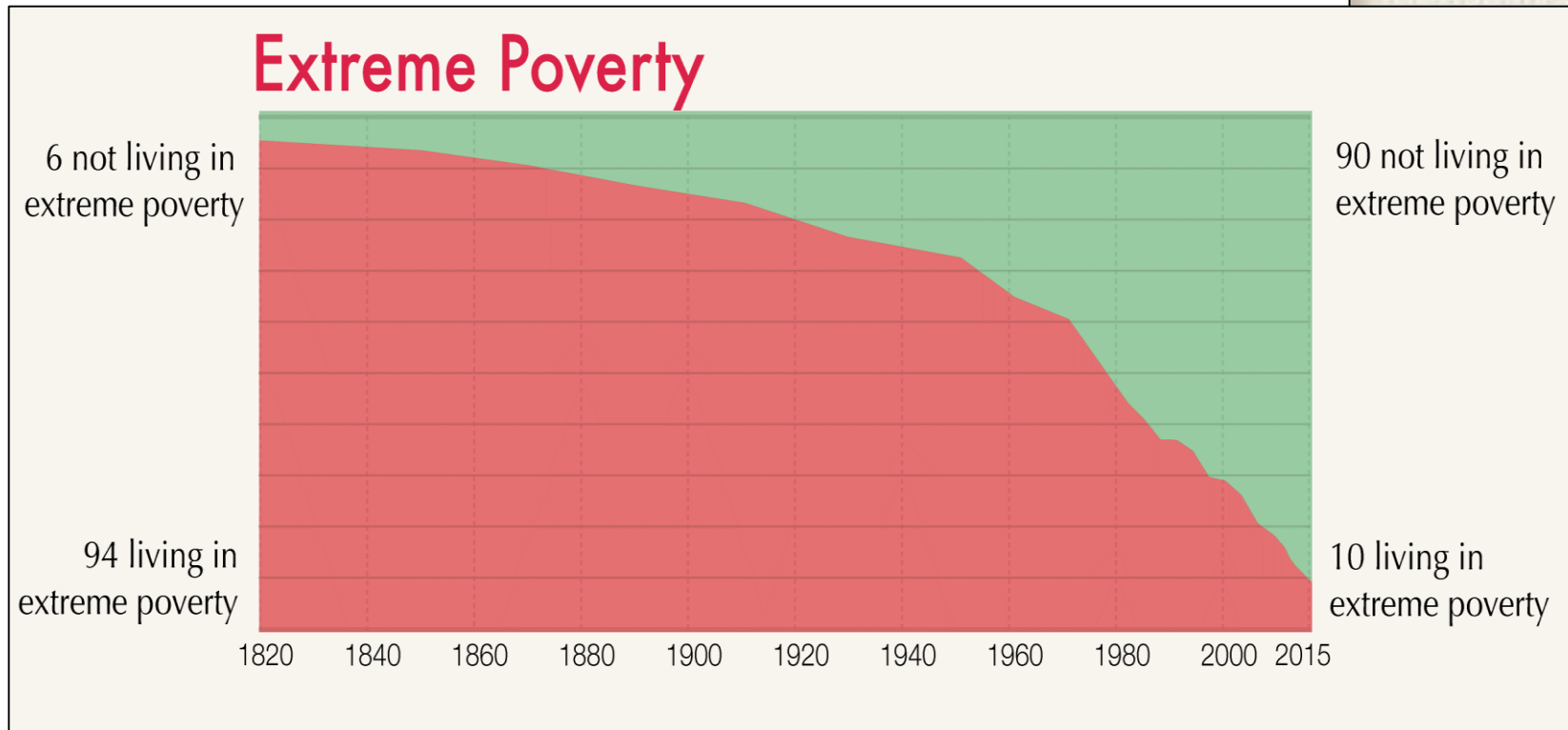
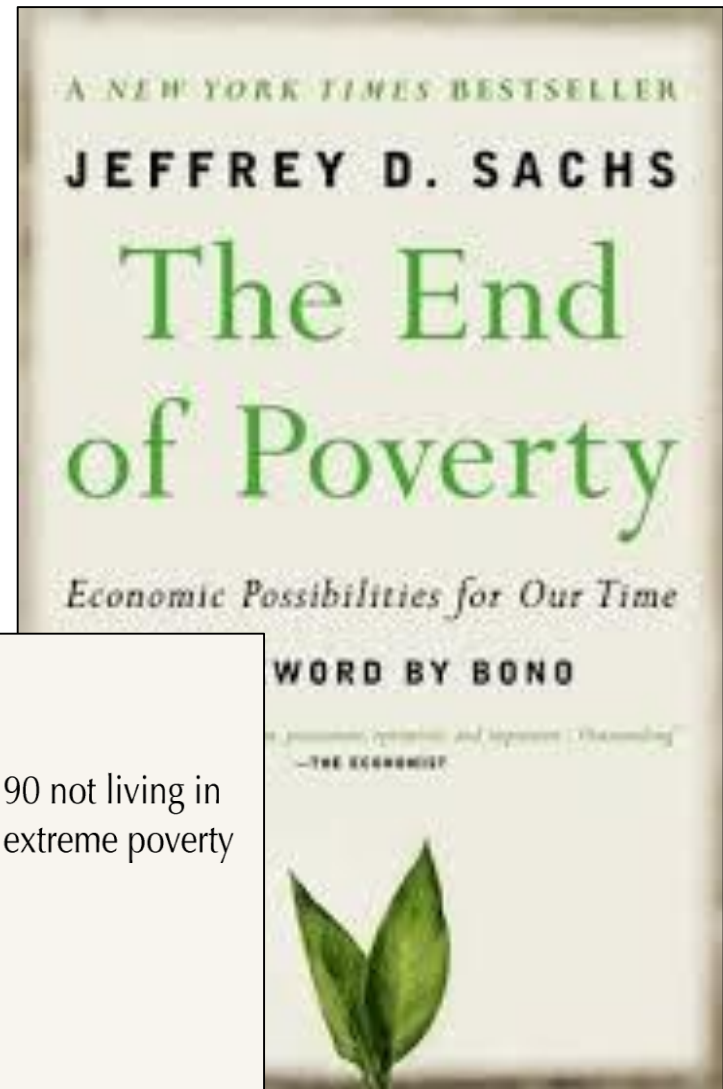
The 'poverty eradicators'

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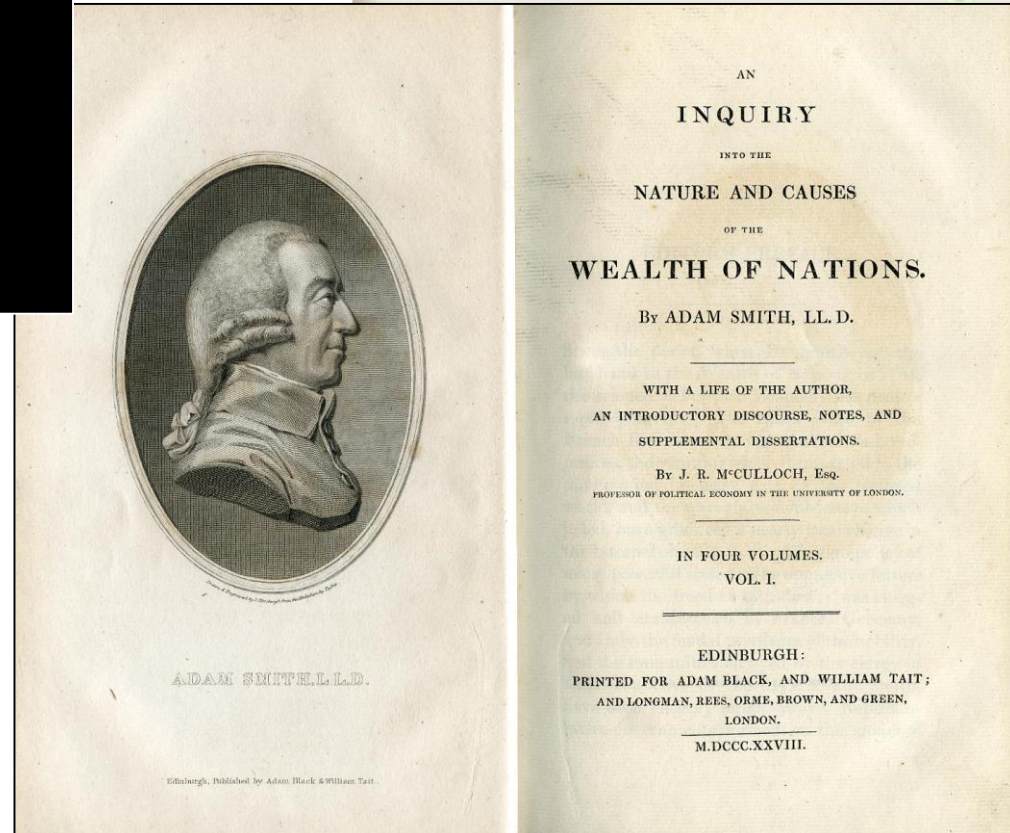
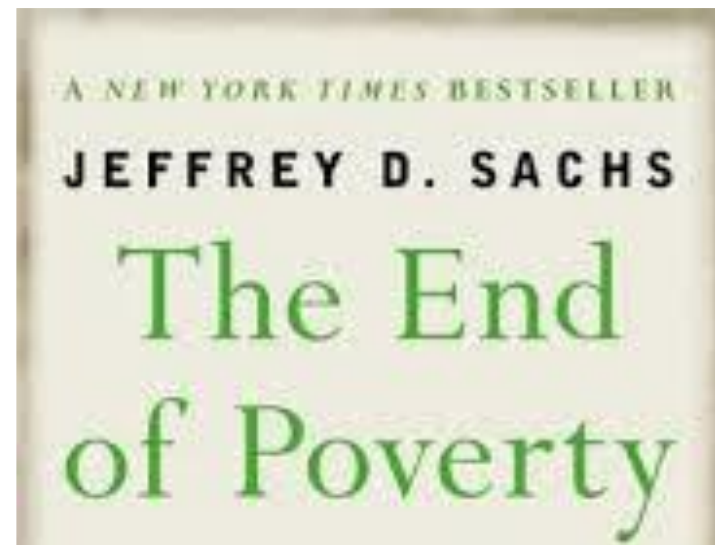


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The 'poverty persistors'

"By necessities I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but what ever the customs of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even the lowest order, to be without."
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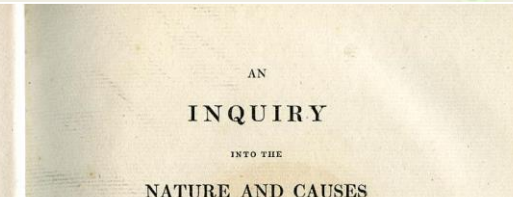
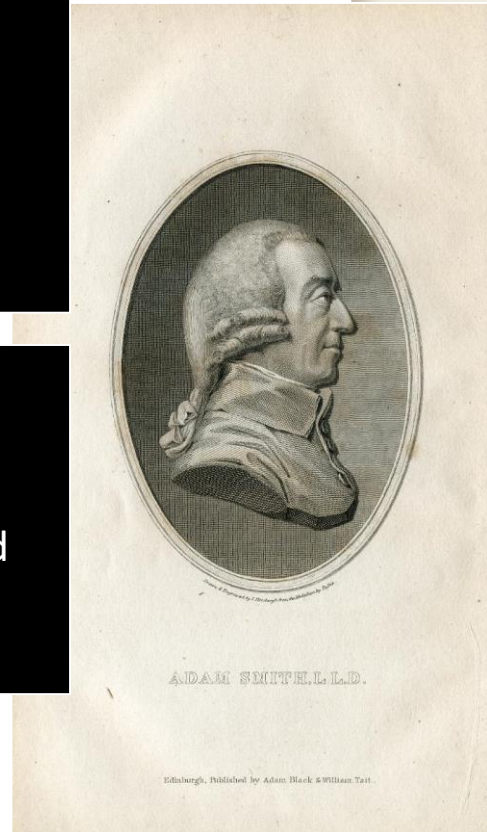
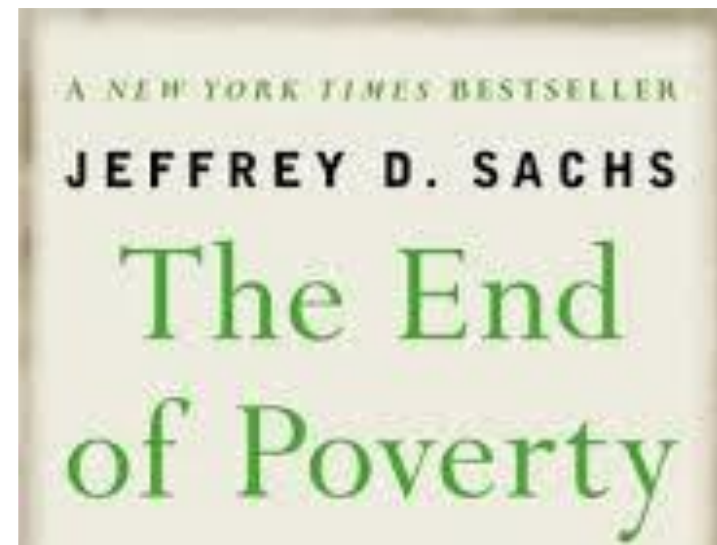
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The 'poverty transformers'

"...poverty cannot be eradicated ... on the contrary poverty is continually being created and recreated under the institutions of capitalism" (Harriss-White 2006: 1241)



Perspectives

Poverty and Capitalism

While it may be possible to mitigate poverty through social transfers, it is not possible to eradicate the processes that create poverty under capitalism. Eight such processes are discussed: the creation of the preconditions; petty commodity production and trade; technological change and unemployment; (petty) commodification; harmful commodities and waste; pauperising crises; climate-change-related pauperisation; and the unrequired, incapacitated and/or dependent human body under capitalism. Ways to regulate these processes and to protect against their impact are discussed.

BARBARA HARRISS-WHITE

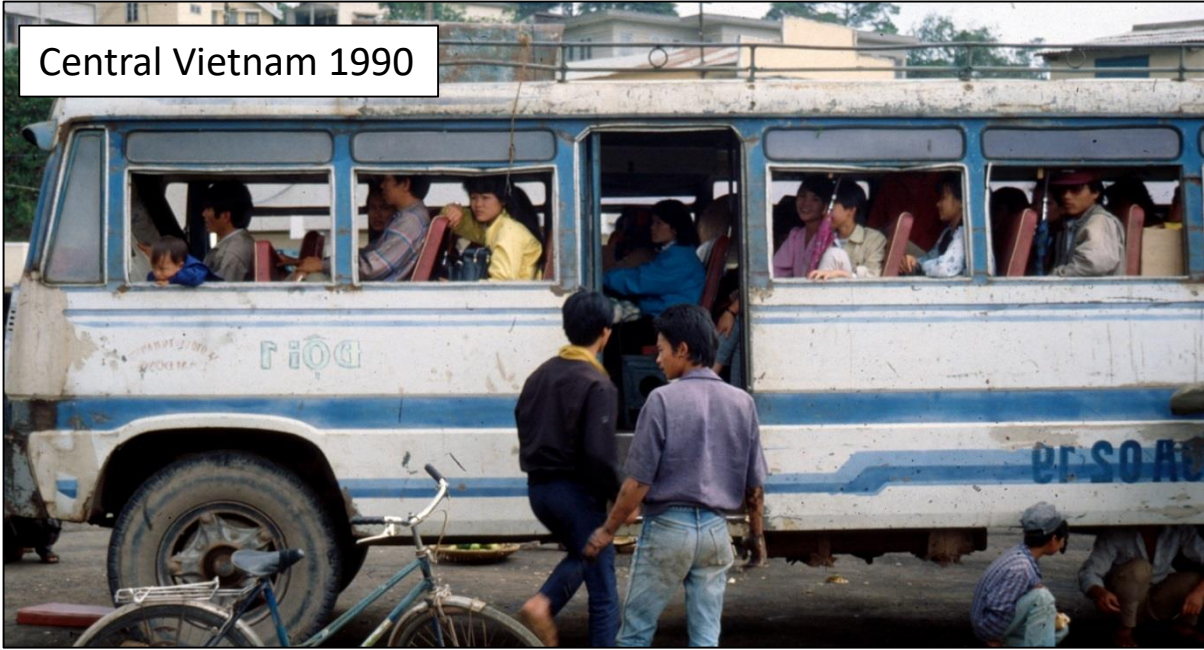
Nations signed up to a set of targets – the Millennium Development Goals

How do we make sense of 'the' poor? (Here, in northern Laos.)

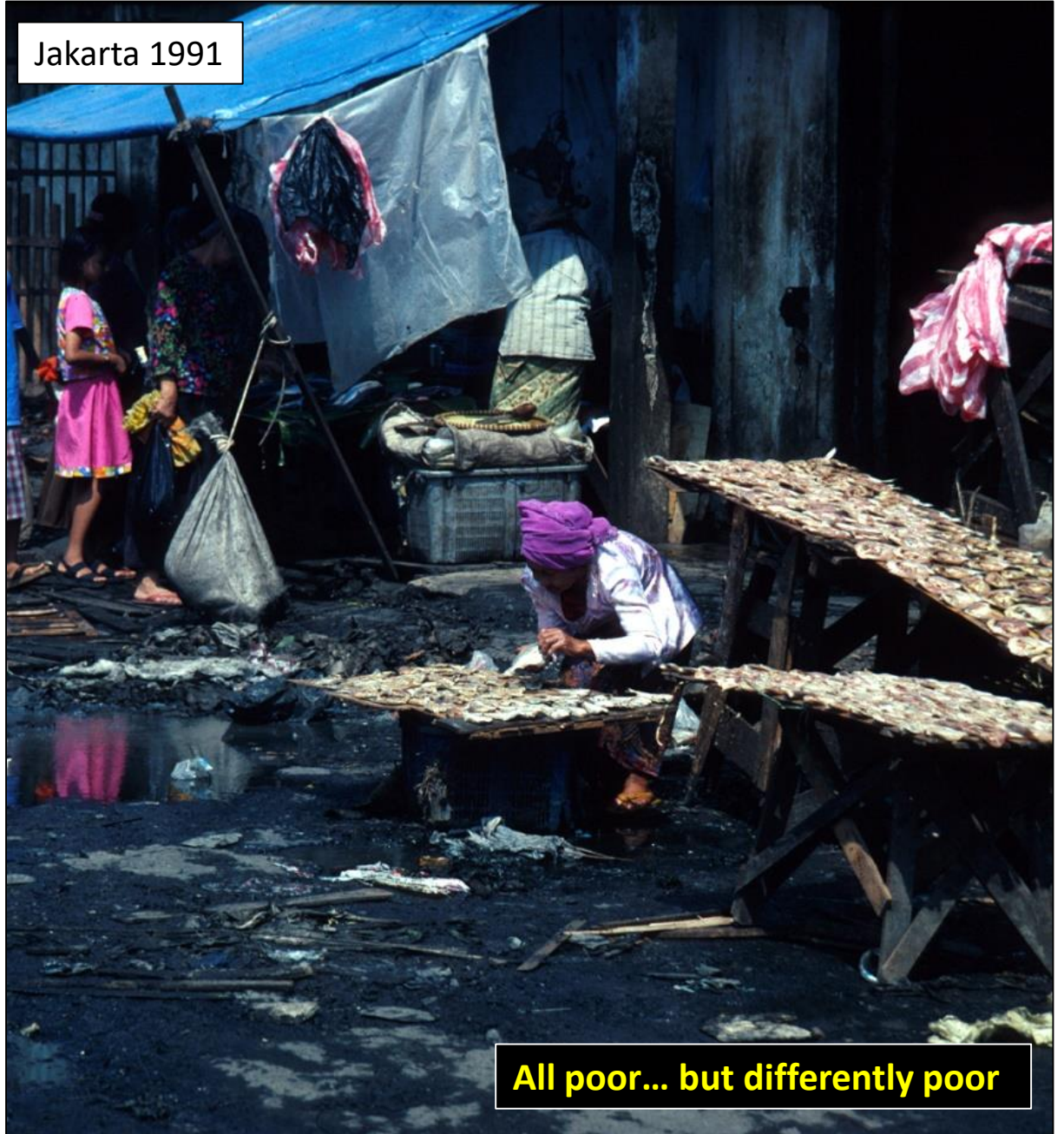
- As experiencing an inherited poverty, rooted in the past?
- As forever having feelings of prosperity undermined, as luxuries become necessities?
- As finding themselves caught in new articulations of poverty linked to capitalism?



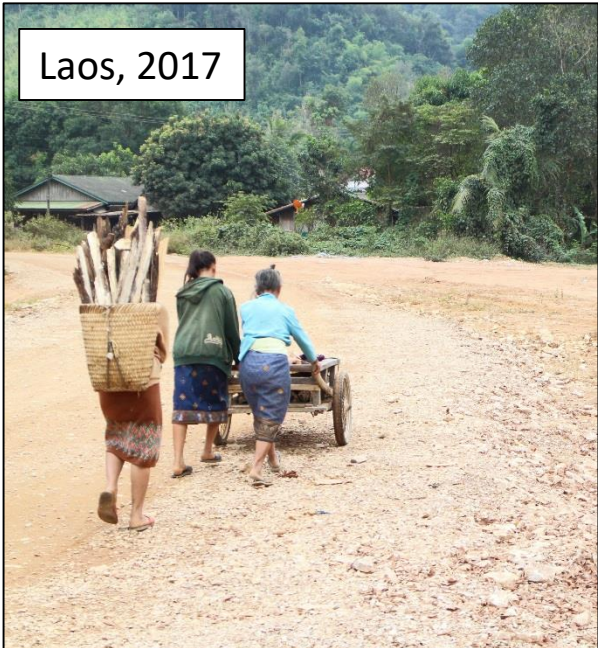
Central Vietnam 1990



Jakarta 1991



Laos, 2017



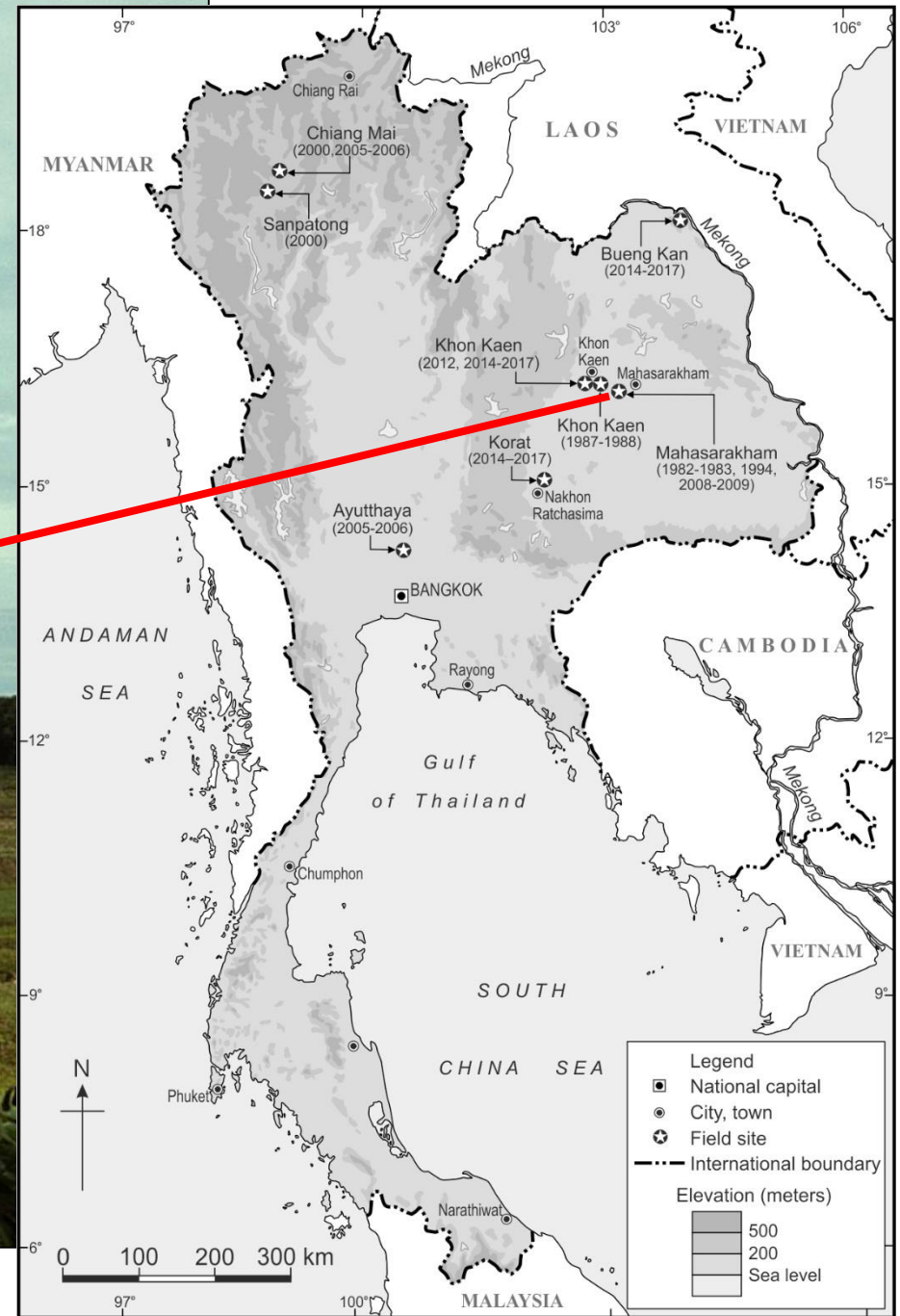
Northeast Thailand, 1982



All poor... but differently poor

The experience of poverty

One region, two villages, two households, thirty years



One region, **two villages**, two households, thirty years

Ban Non Tae, 1983



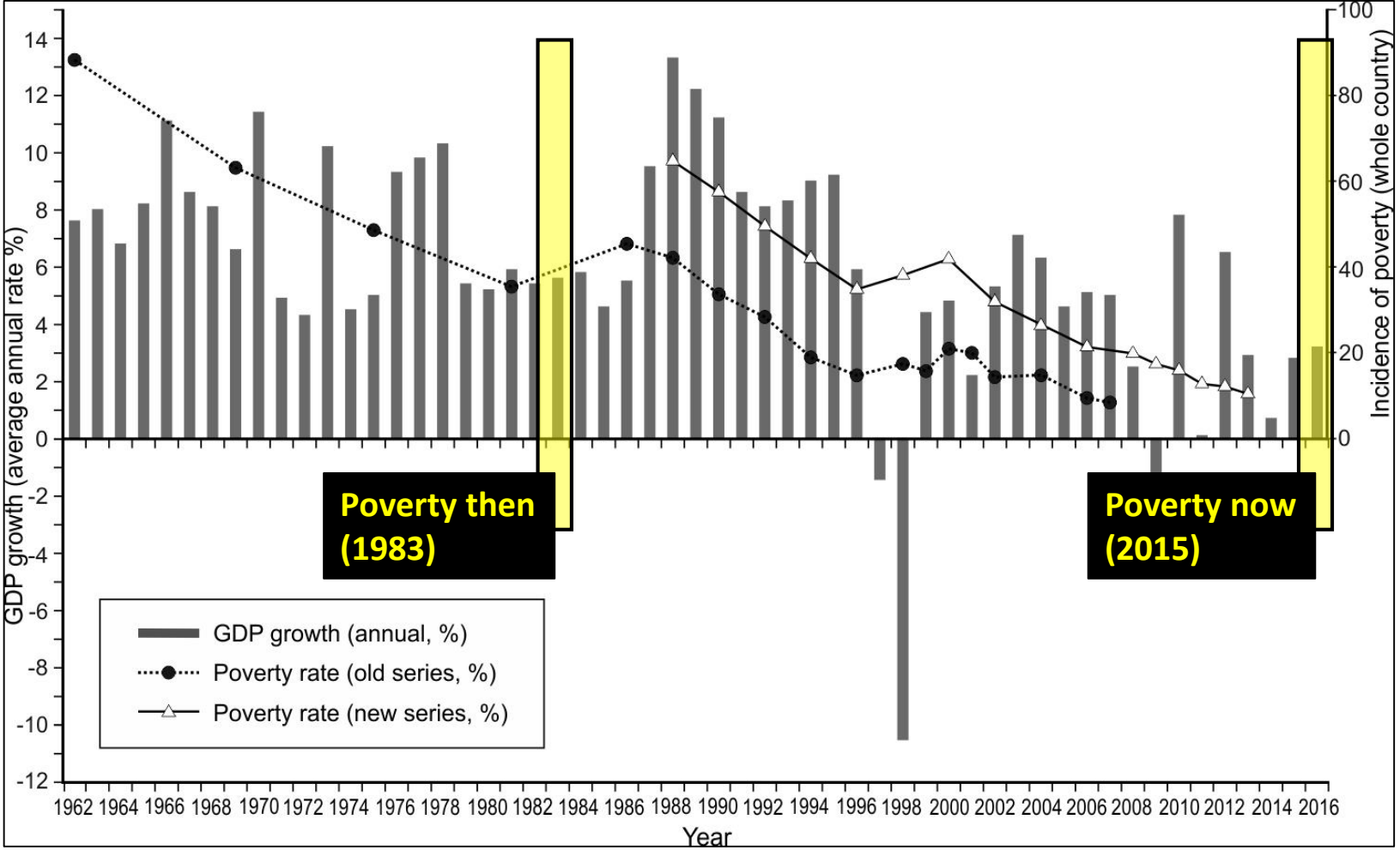
Ban Lao, 2014



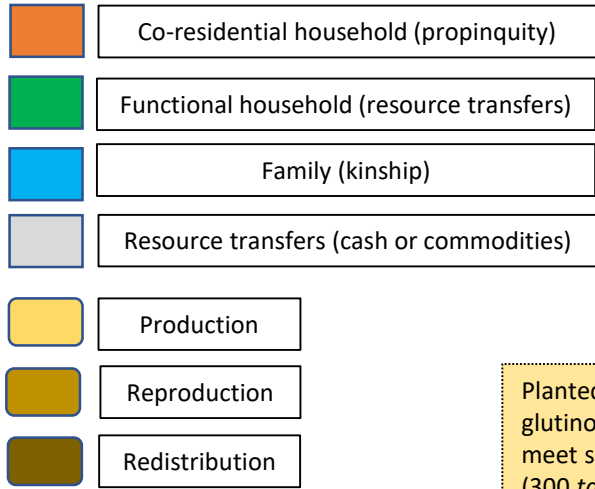
One region, two villages, **two households**, thirty years



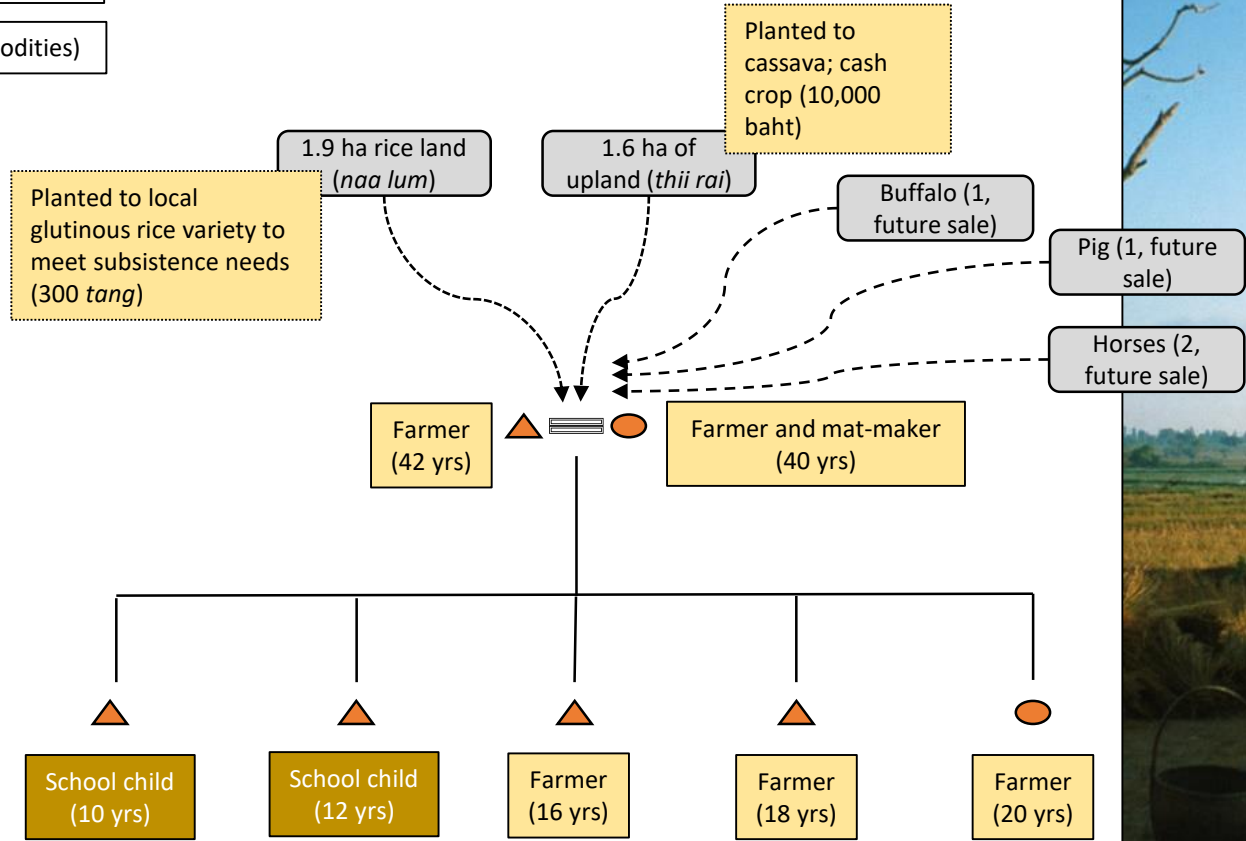
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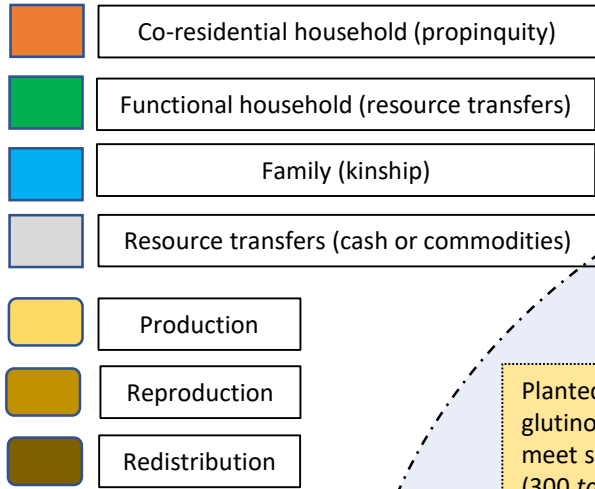


Footprints of poverty and prosperity

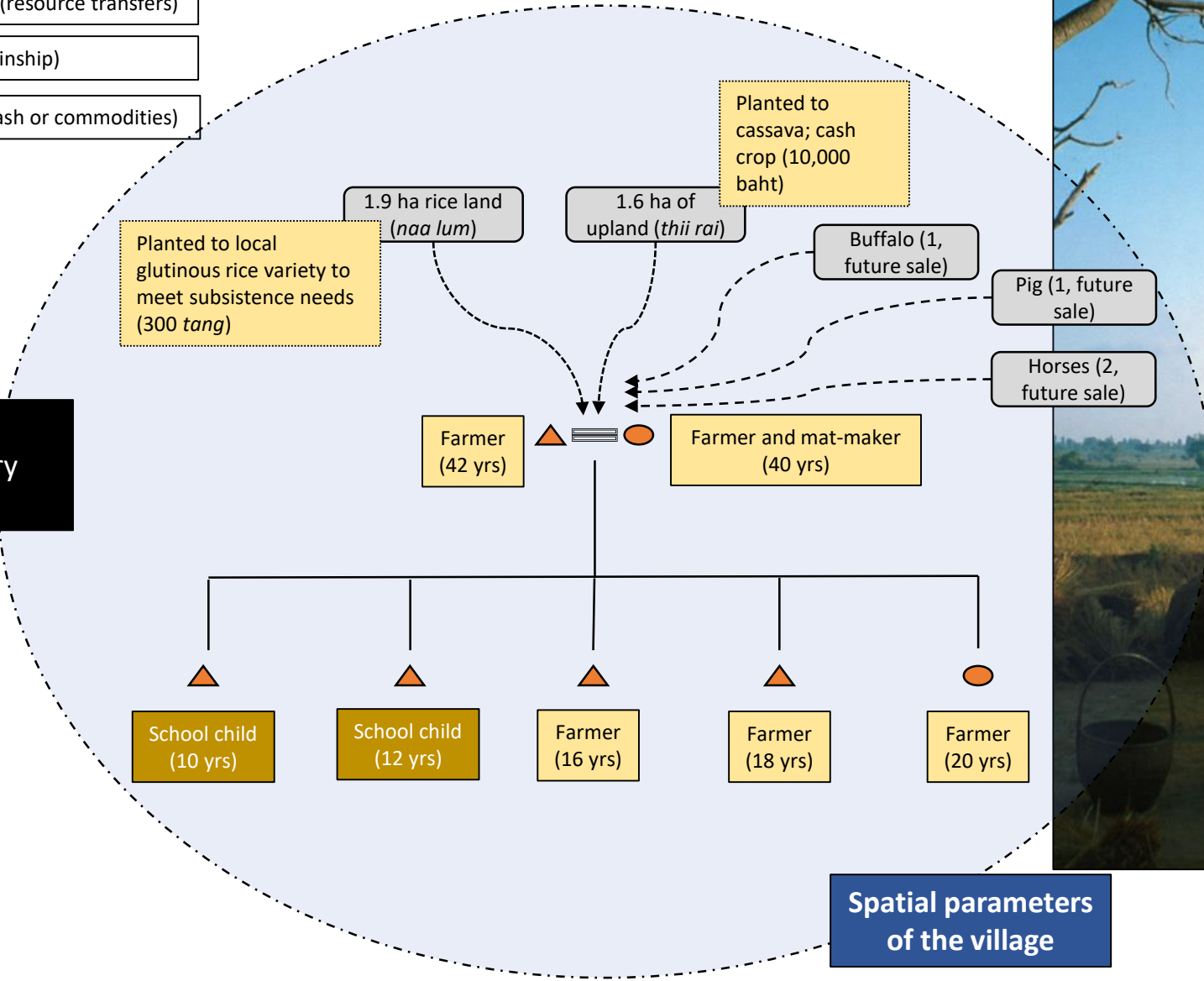


Nai Nit Khaman
 (interview: 29th January
 1983 [BNT05])

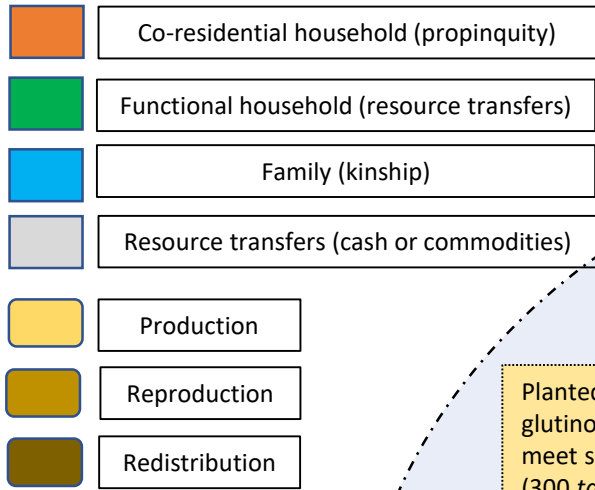




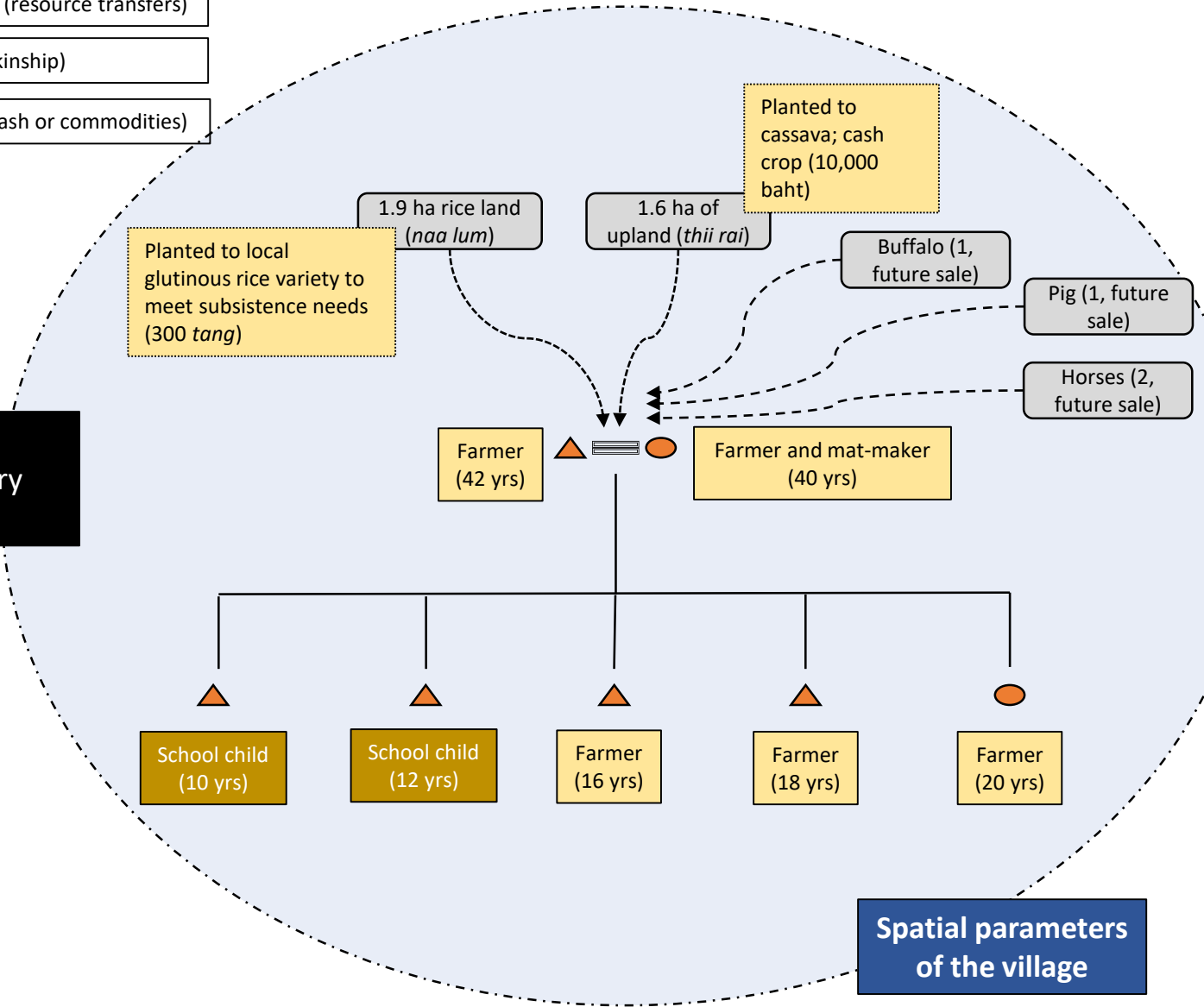
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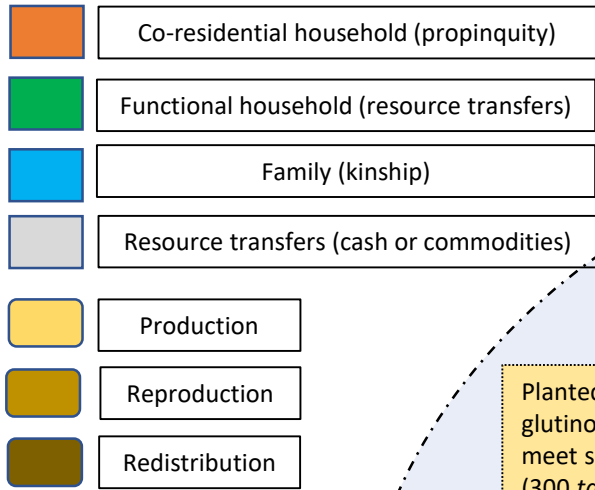
Spatial parameters of the village



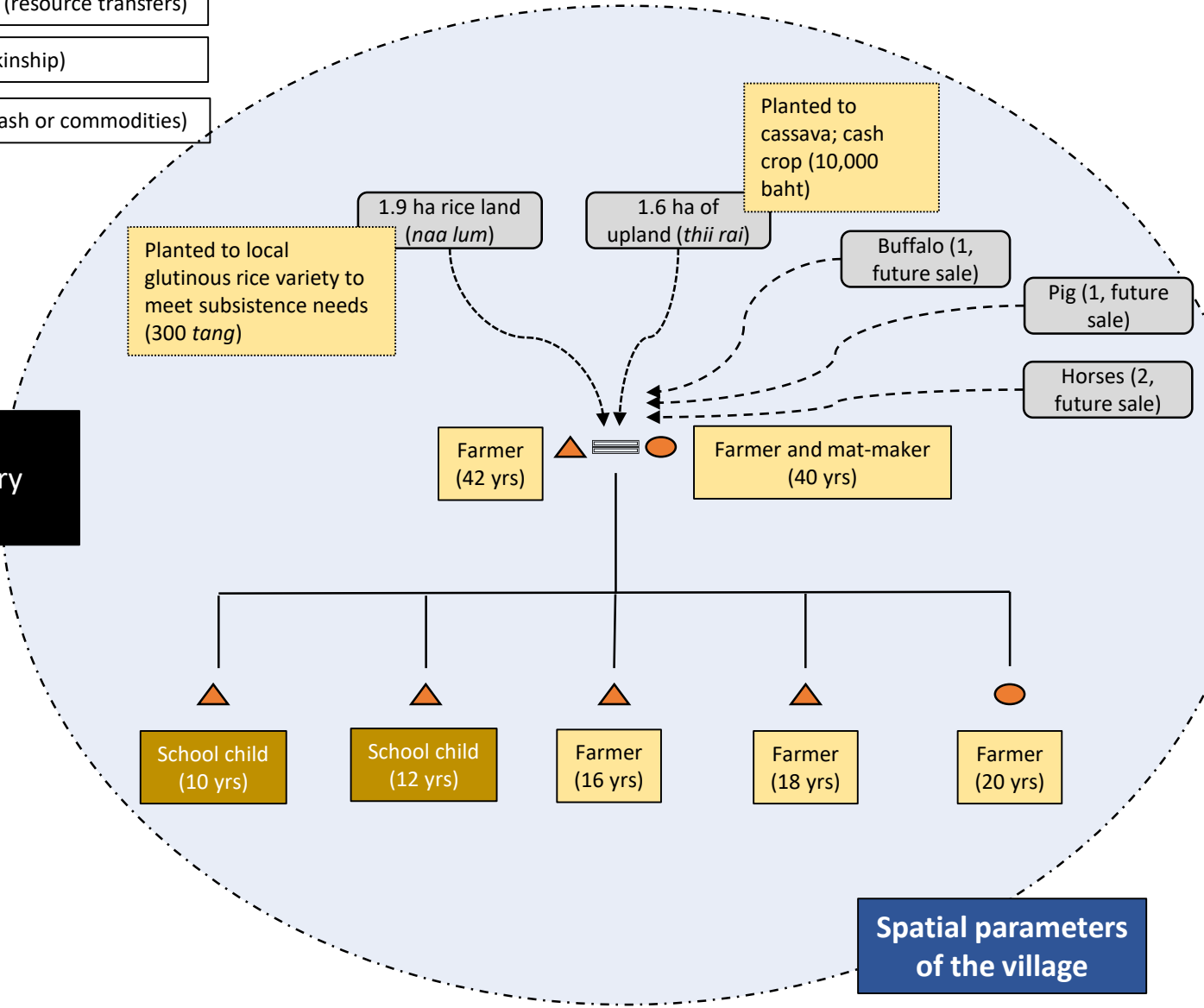
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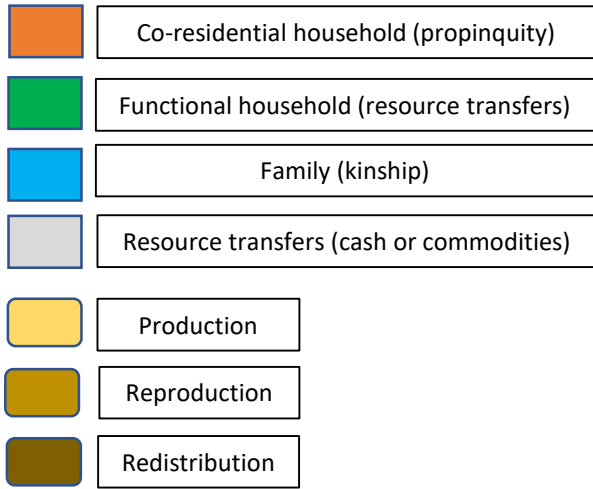
Ban Non Tae	Ban Lao
Household as co-residential	
Village as coherent containers of social and economic processes	
Livelihood as multi-stranded but locally rooted	
Household as subsistence oriented	
Poverty as an inheritance of the past	



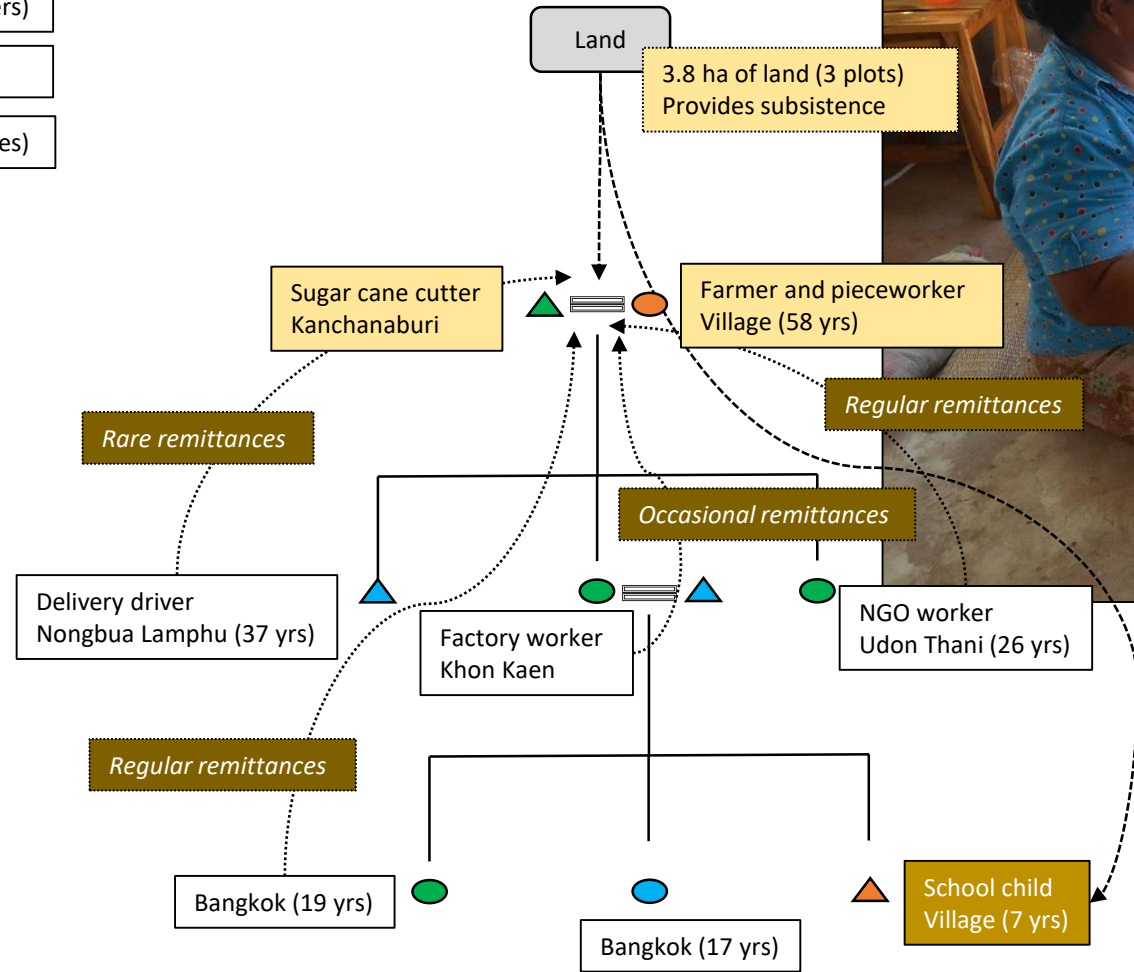
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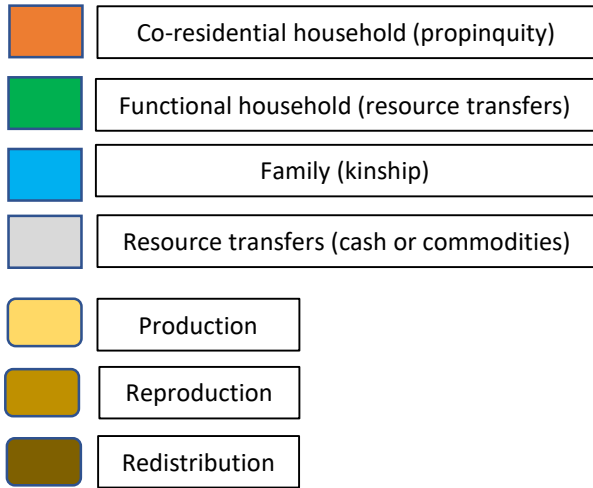


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Objectively poor; experientially non-poor	

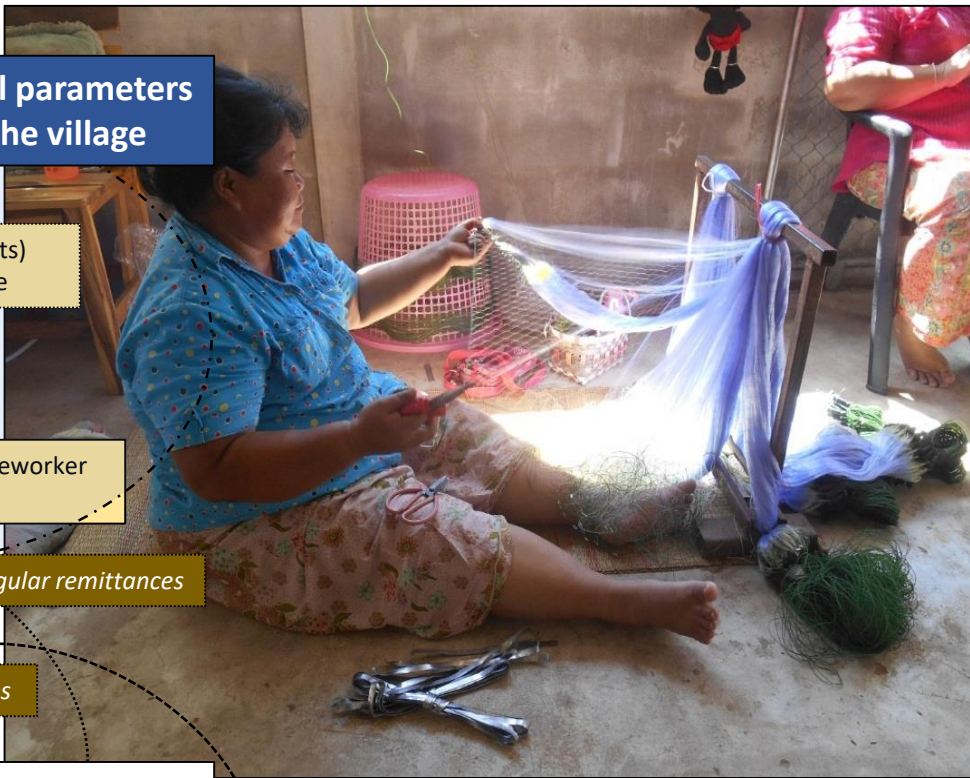
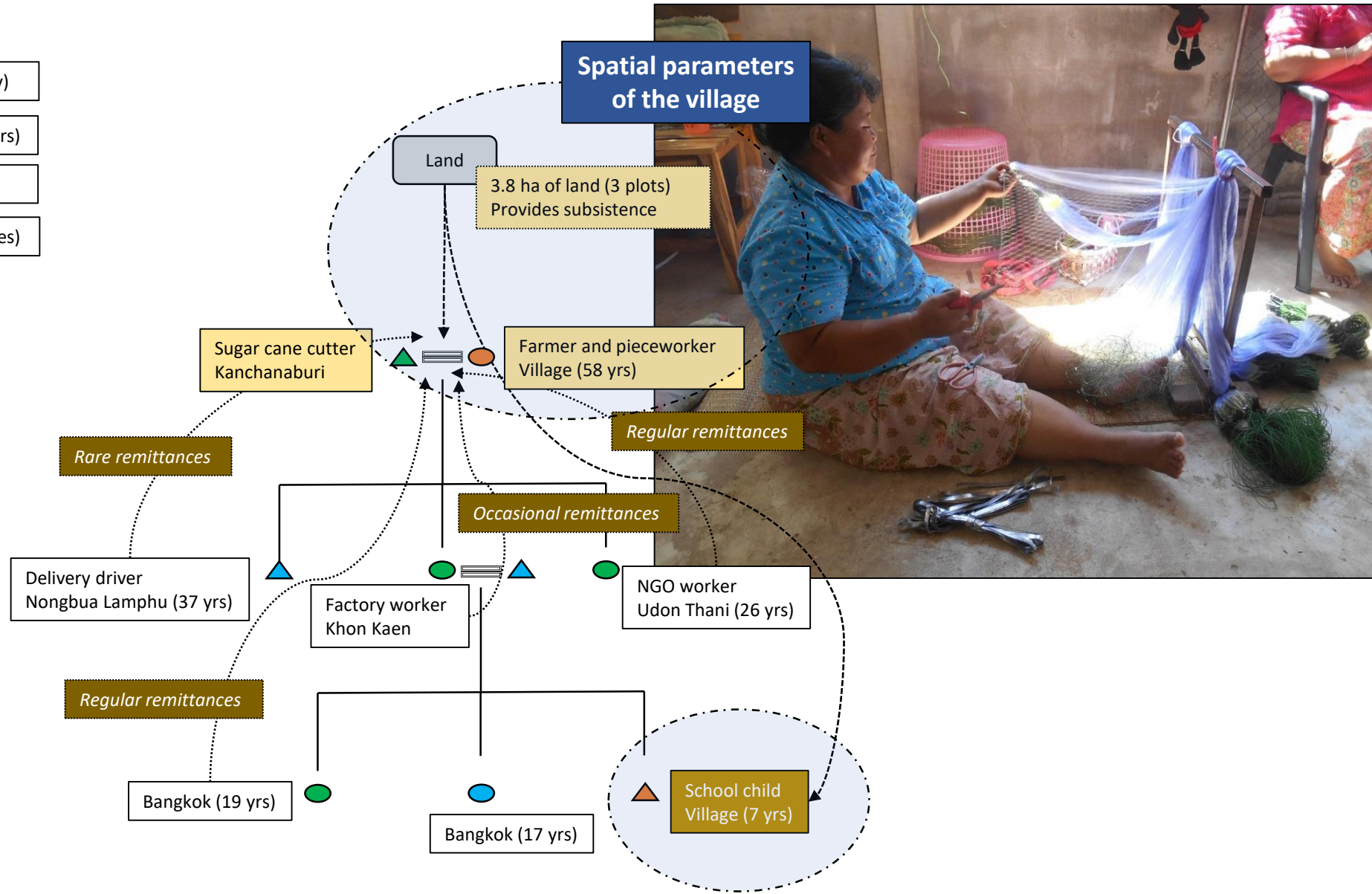


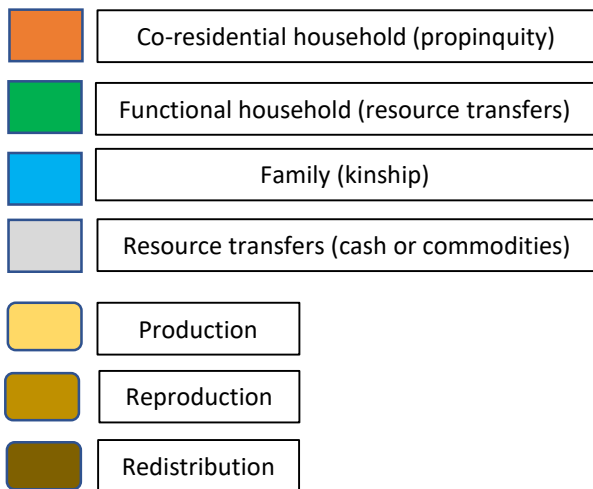
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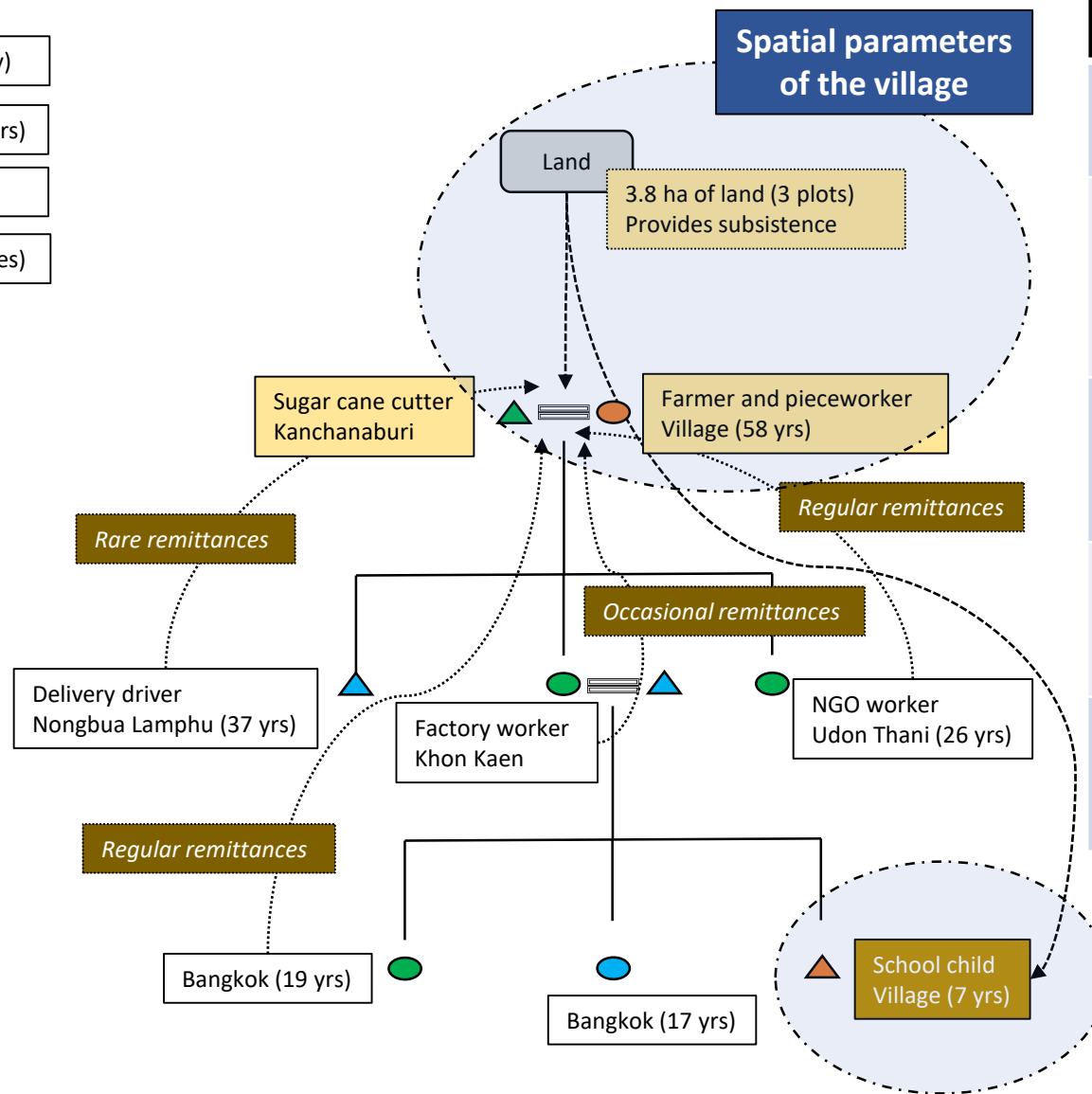


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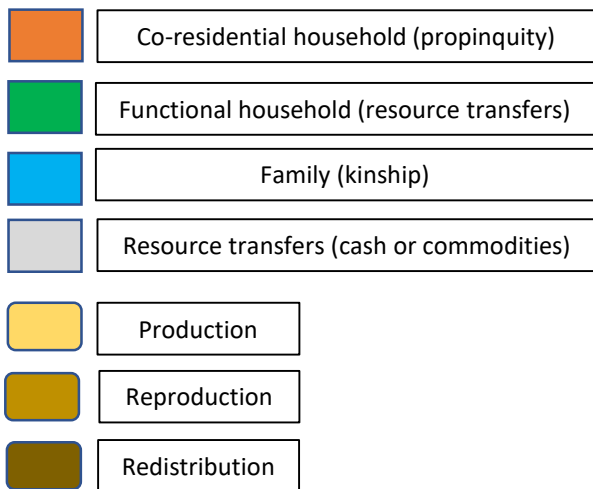




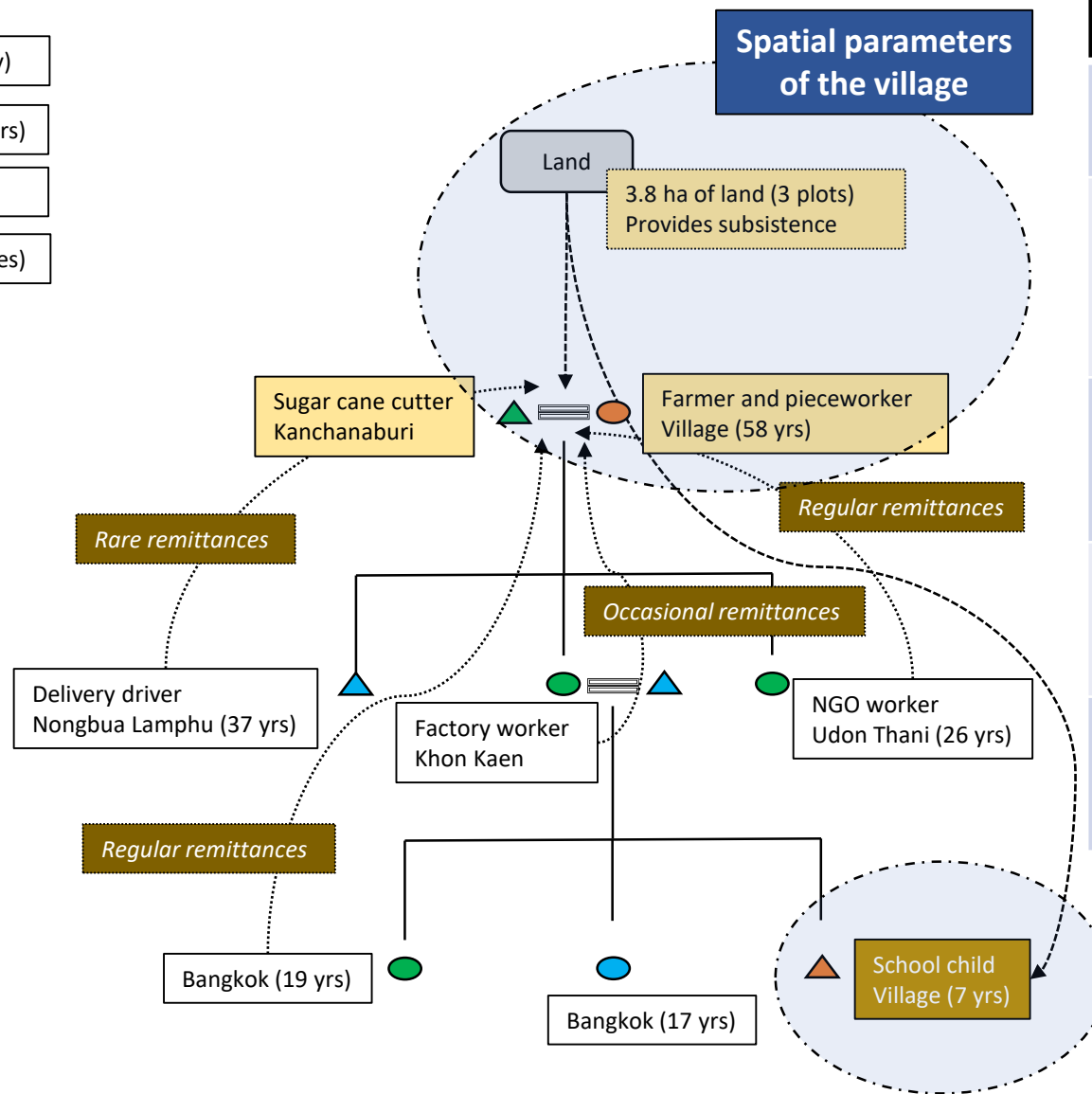
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Ban Non Tae	Ban Lao
Household as co-residential	Household as multi-sited
Village as coherent containers of social and economic processes	Village as hollowed out and porous
Livelihood as multi-stranded but locally rooted	Livelihood as multi-stranded and multi-sited
Household as subsistence oriented	Household as market oriented
Poverty as an inheritance of the past	Poverty as a production of the present



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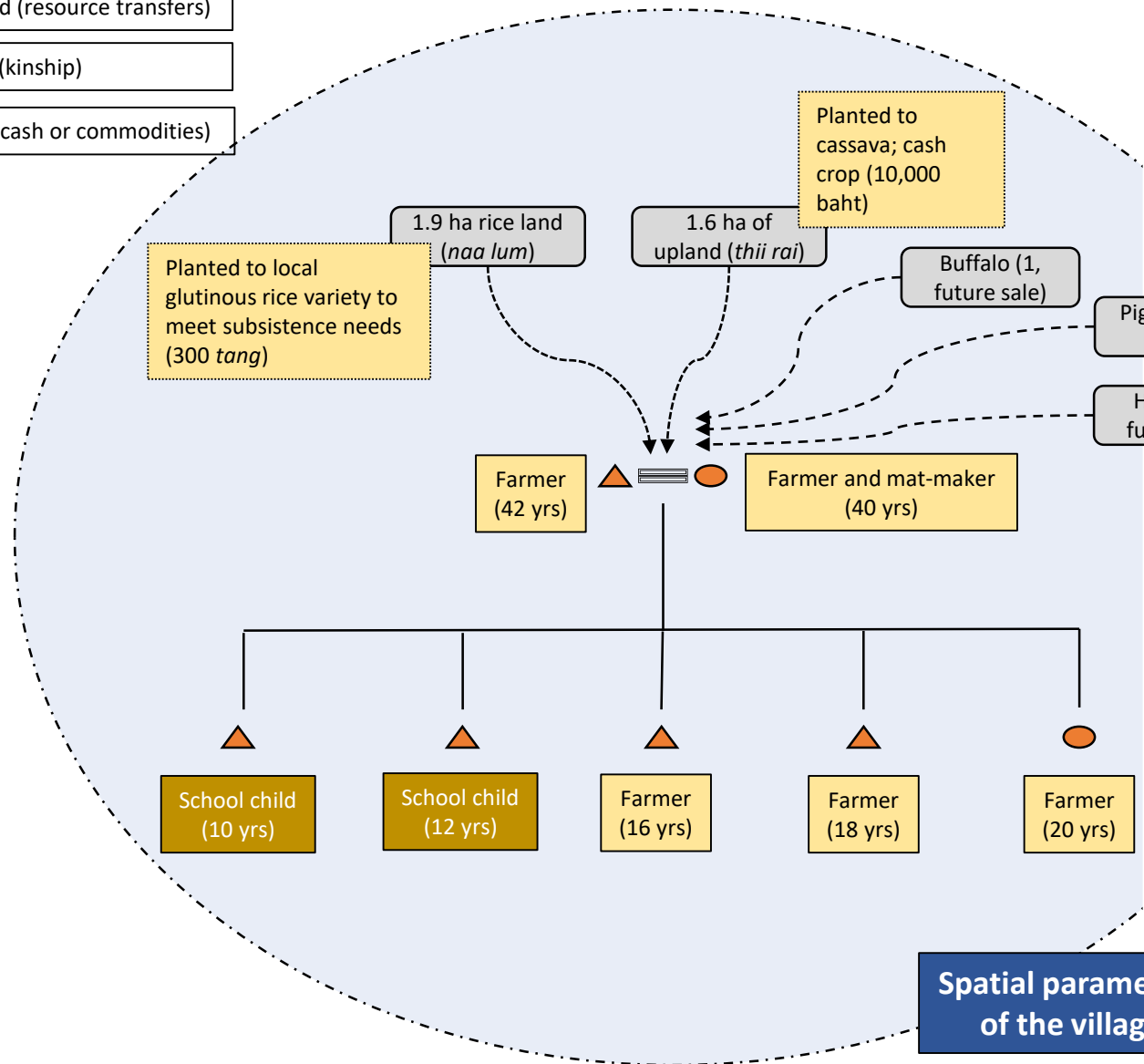
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Objectively non-poor;
 experientially poor

Escaping (the inherited
poverty of) the past

Ban Non Tae in 1982
 What you saw is what you got...

- Co-residential household (propinquity)
- Functional household (resource transfers)
- Family (kinship)
- Resource transfers (cash or commodities)
- Production
- Reproduction
- Redistribution





Roads matter

[When I was a child we] used buffaloes to plow our rice fields. In the morning I walked from home and brought our buffaloes to my father – at the field hut and it was so far! ...after school I had to walk there to tend the buffaloes. ... Such a tough time! Farming rice was so hard. Three [of my siblings] died very young and another died when an adult. [In addition to rice farming] I collected wild vegetables to sell to the pig farm owners. I could get 10-25 satang [0.10-0.25 baht] for each bundle. I could make 2-3 baht a day for the next school day's pocket money. We used [the fields] as a toilet in those days. Where I live now, in those days, there was no power – no light and we used kerosene lamps and walked everywhere – it was just up to our own feet. It took time, until March, before we could fill our granary. It took time to find good days to thresh the rice. To have enough paddy [in the granary to feed the family] took almost a year.

Farmer, Ban Lao, 4.8.2016 [Ban Lao Phase 3 #03]

Ban Lao: planning and developing the village

Development (*kanpattana*) comes to the village

- **Administration**
- Modernisation
- Education
- Integration
- Marketisation

Date	Intervention/event	Nature of intervention
1803	Ban Lao established by migrants from neighbouring Ban Thum	-
1870	Por Khun Arun Hukhair becomes the first village leader (until 1900)	Administration
1892	Prince Damrong's administrative reforms	Administration
1932	National education programme introduced with abolition of absolute monarchy	Education
1939	Ban Lao primary school established	Education
1939	Railway line from Bangkok to Korat extended to Khon Kaen	Integration
1957	Friendship Highway from Bangkok to Nong Khai via Khon Kaen completed	Integration
1959	Poorer villagers settle on public land	-
1961	First five-year national economic development plan (1961-1966)	Administration
1966	Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives established	Marketisation
1973	First rice mill becomes operational	Marketisation
1976	Road to Ban Lao surfaced	Integration
1976	First shop opens	Marketisation
1979	Well drilled for fresh water	Modernisation
1980	Village connected to mains electricity	Modernisation
1983	Child development centre established	Education
1992	Some Ban Lao villagers sell their land to outside speculators	Marketisation
1995	Water supply provided by the Department of Public Works	Modernisation
1996	First private land line telephone installed	Integration
1997	Village streets paved with concrete	Modernisation
2001	Receives 1 million baht under PM Thaksin's village fund initiative	Modernisation
2002	First public land line telephone installed	Integration

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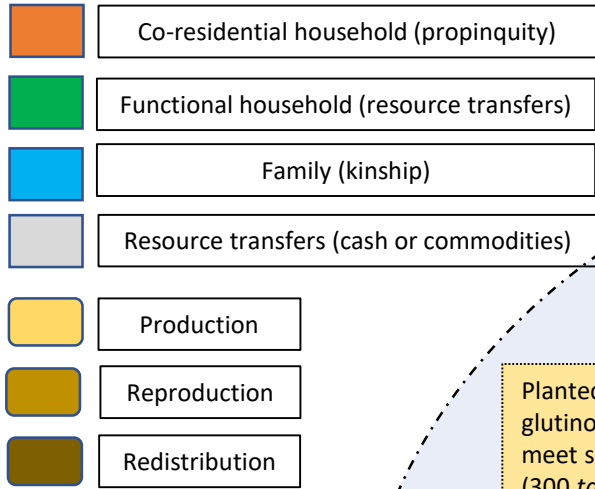
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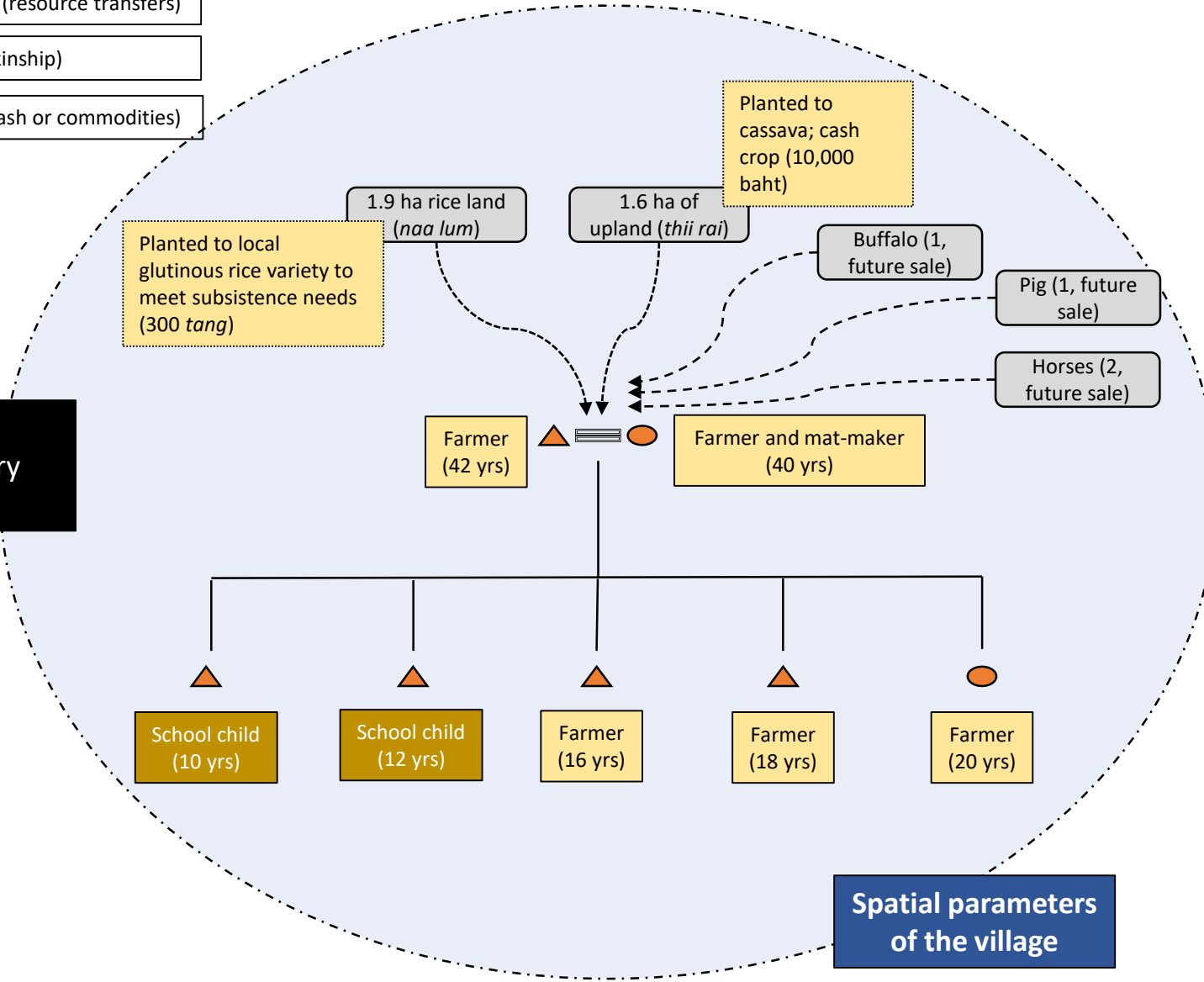
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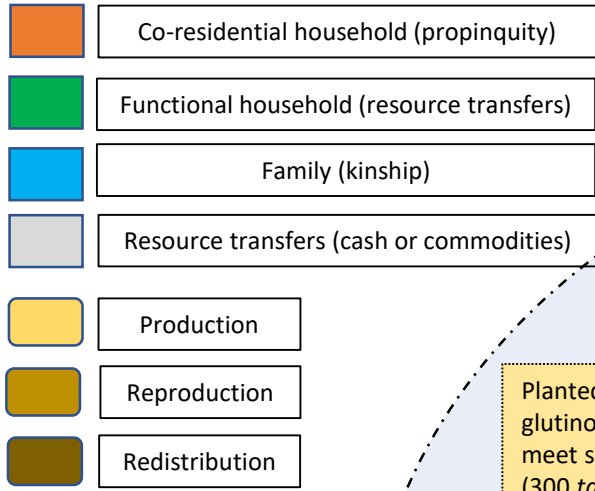
Mobile



Spatial parameters of the village

Development (*kanpattana*) comes to the village

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- Education
- Integration
- Marketisation
- **Mobilisation**

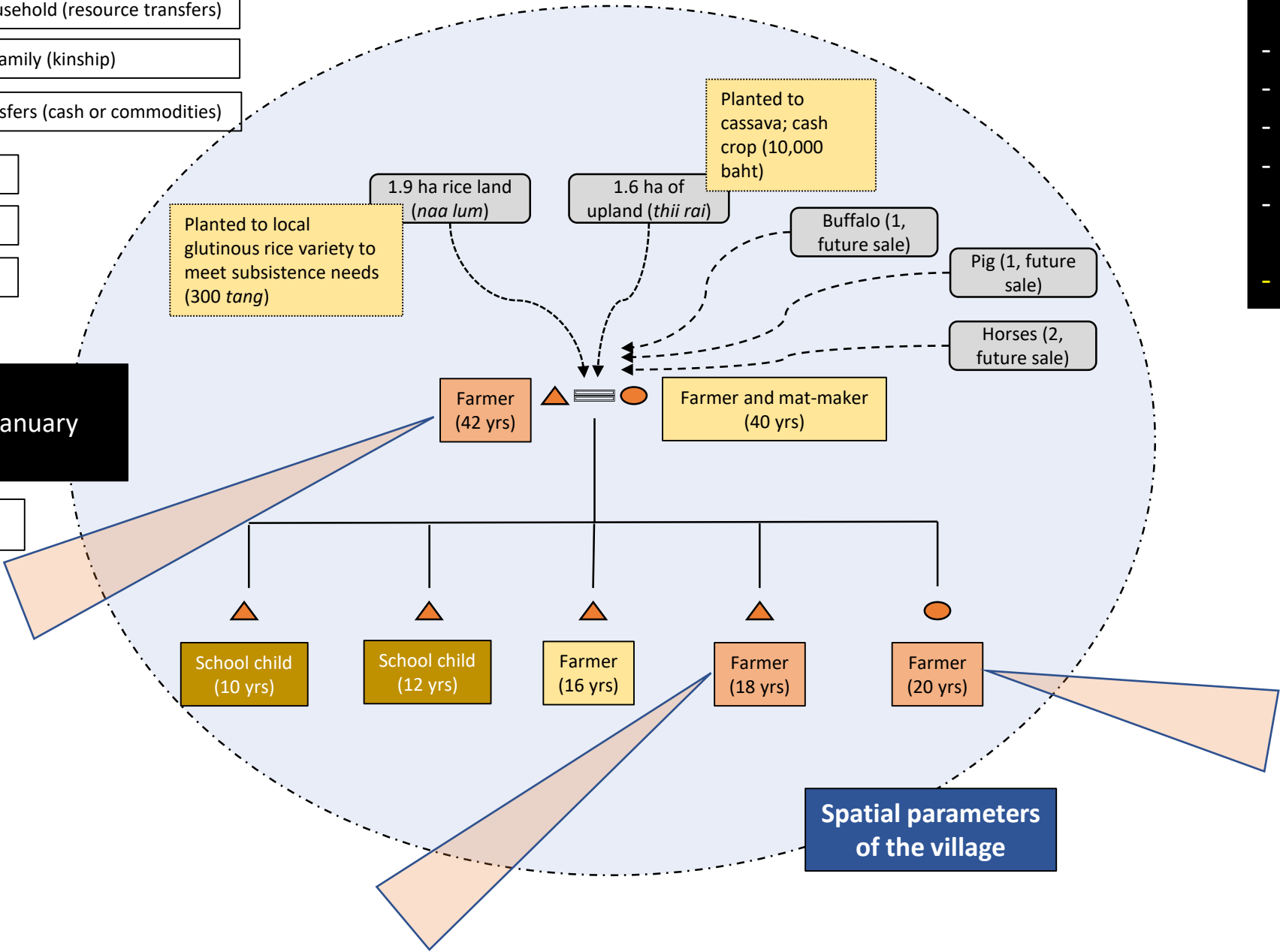


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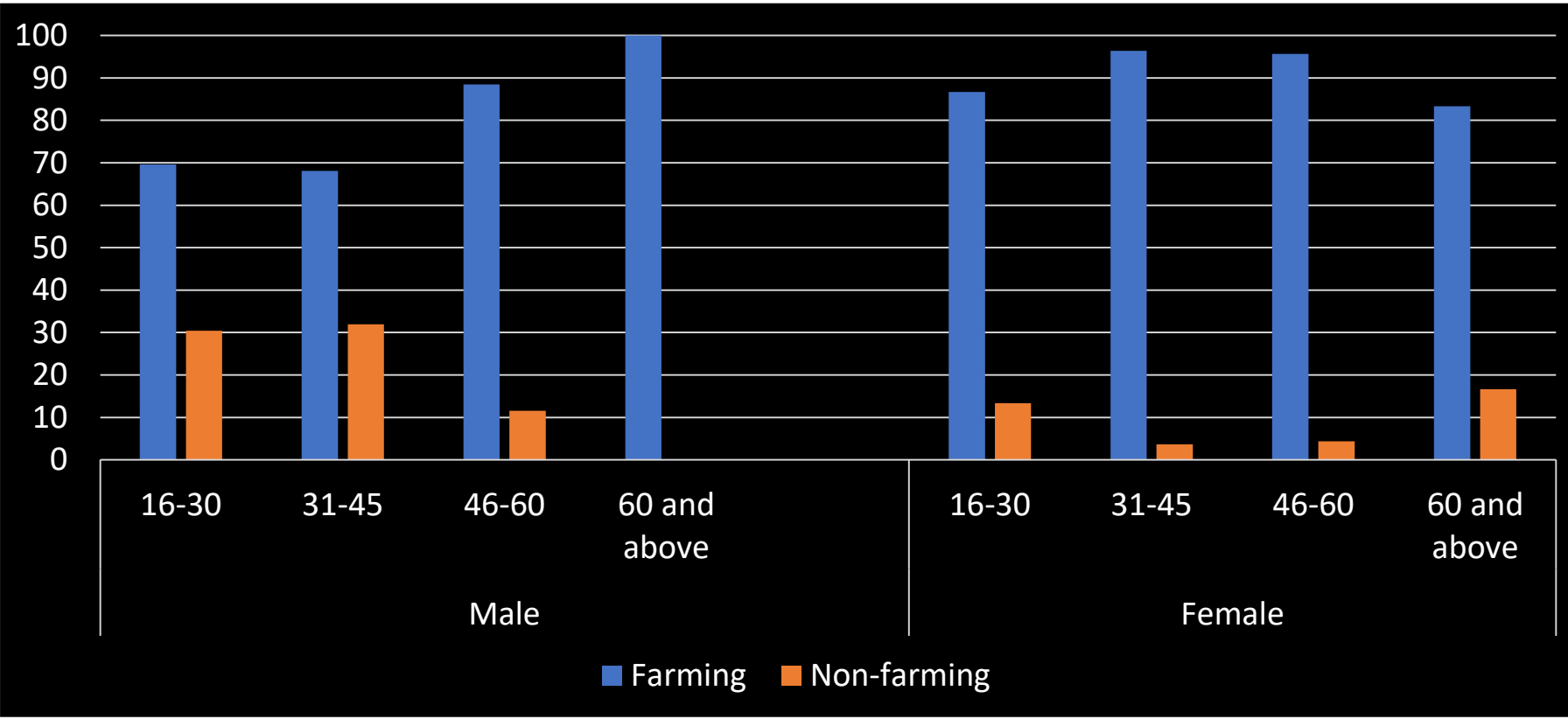
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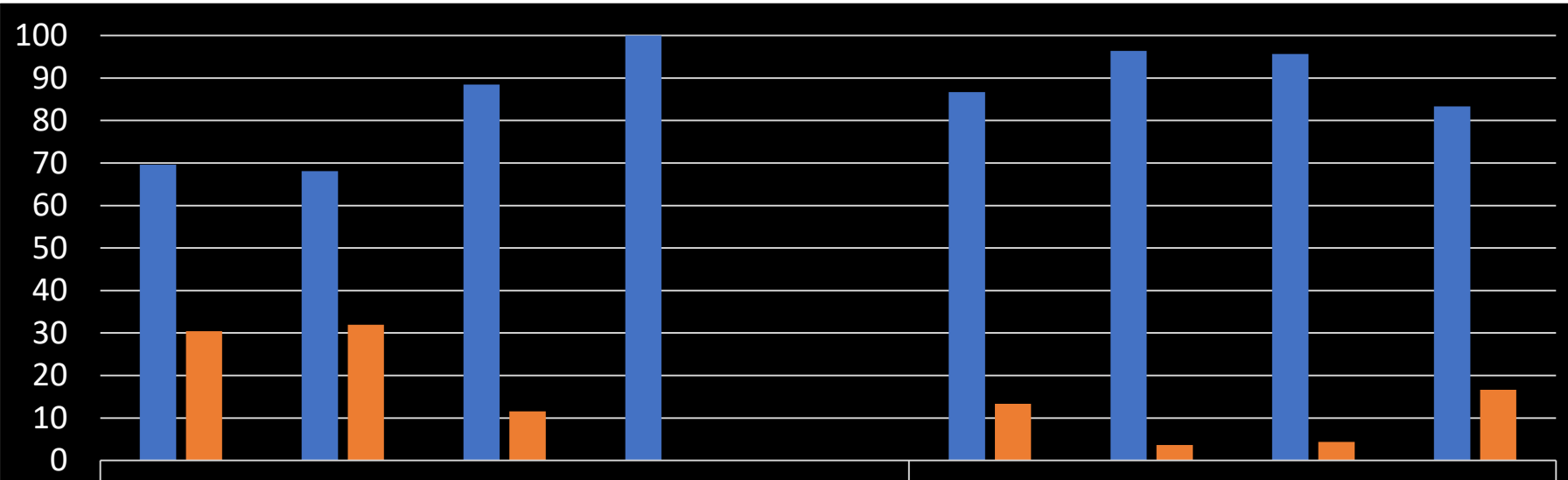
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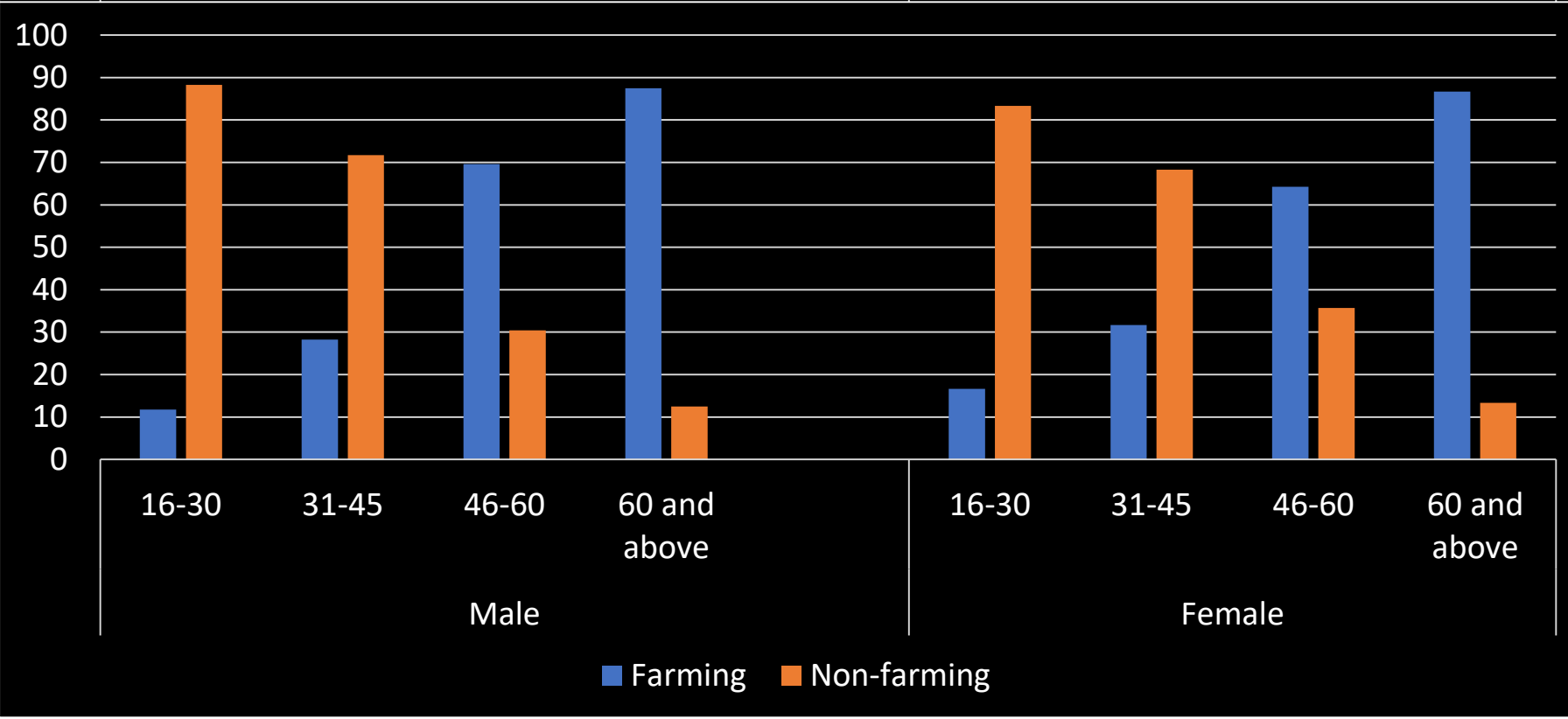


**Farm and non-farm work,
Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha
Song Korn, by gender and
age cohort (% , 1982)**





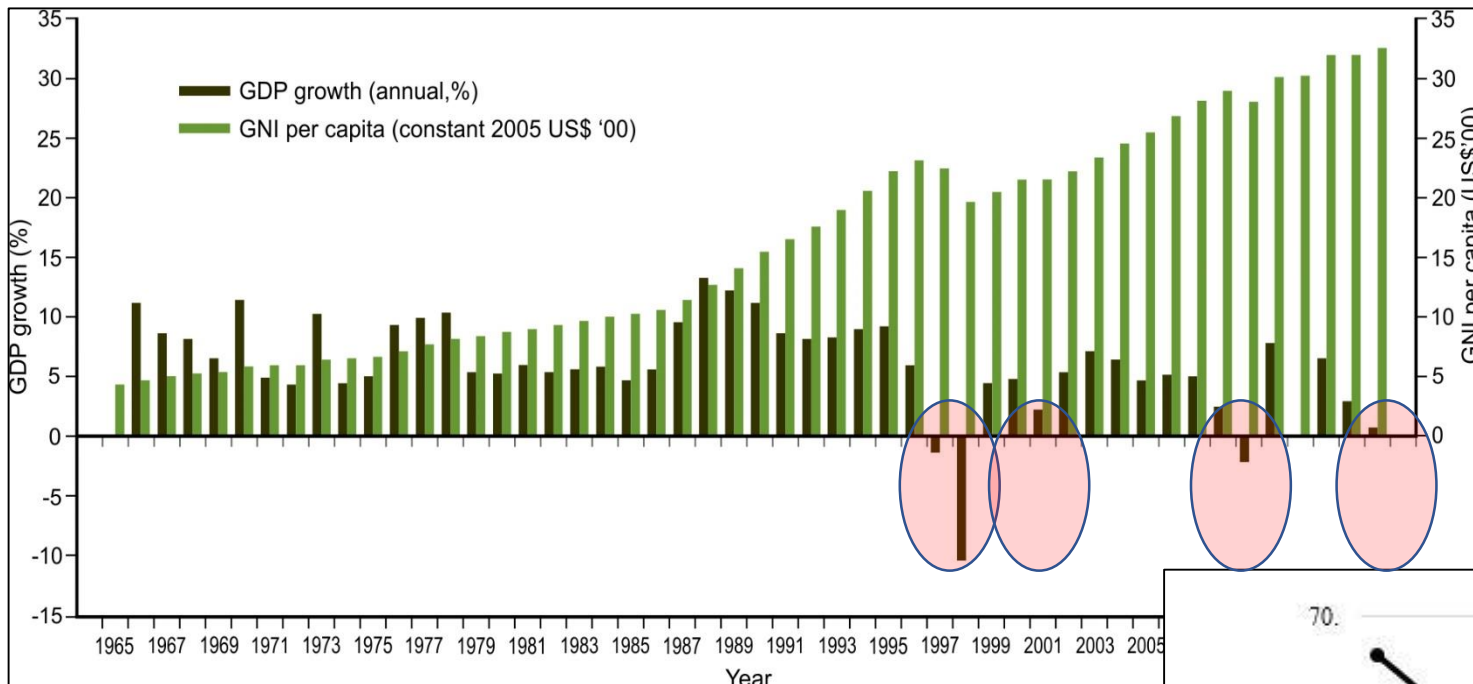
Farm and non-farm work, Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, by gender and age cohort (% , 1982)



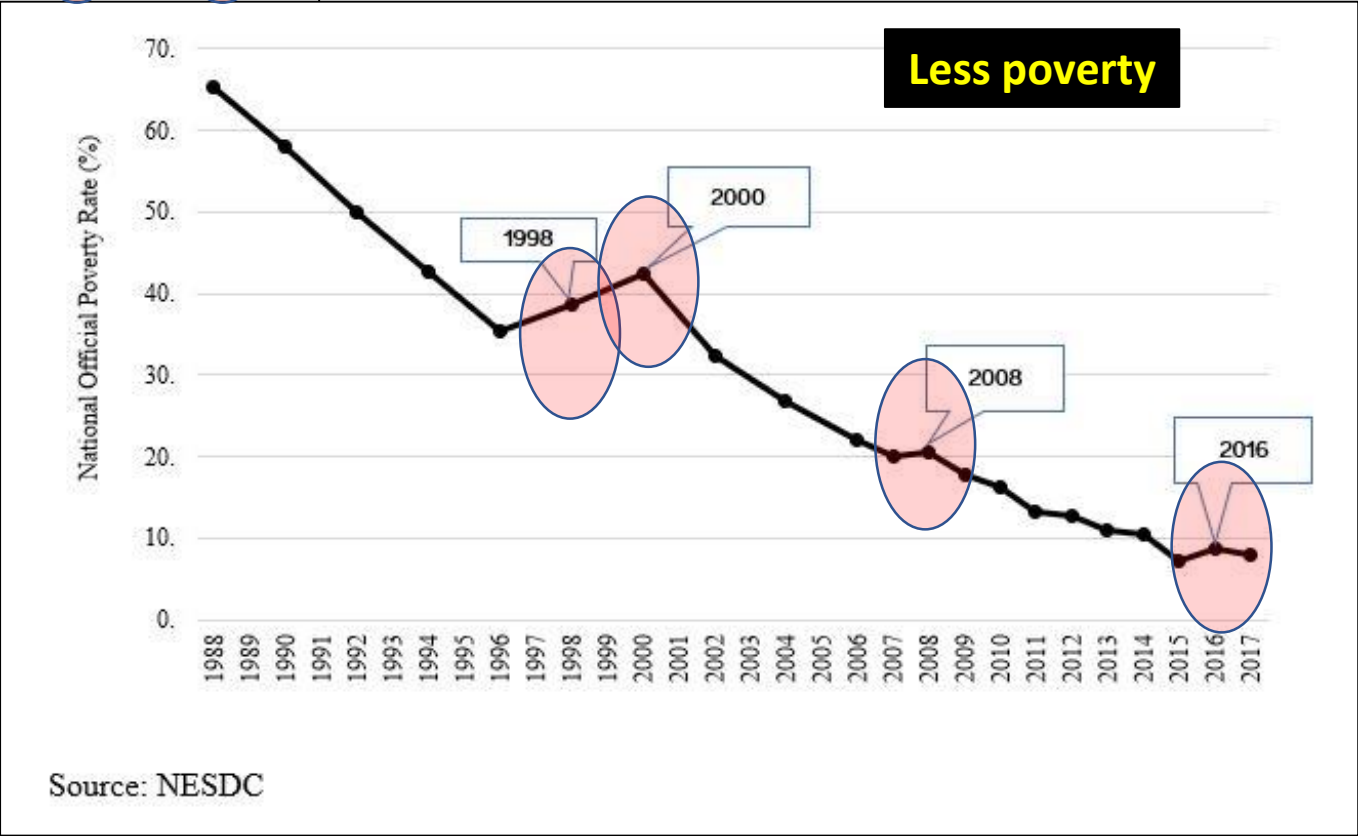
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■ Farming ■ Non-farming

Creating new poverty in an
era of late capitalism



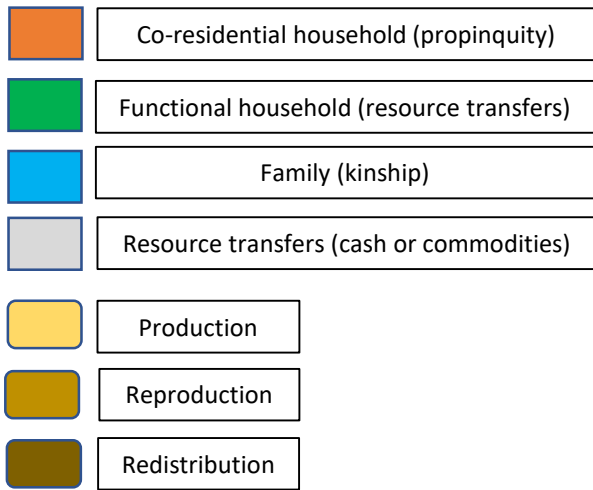
More growth



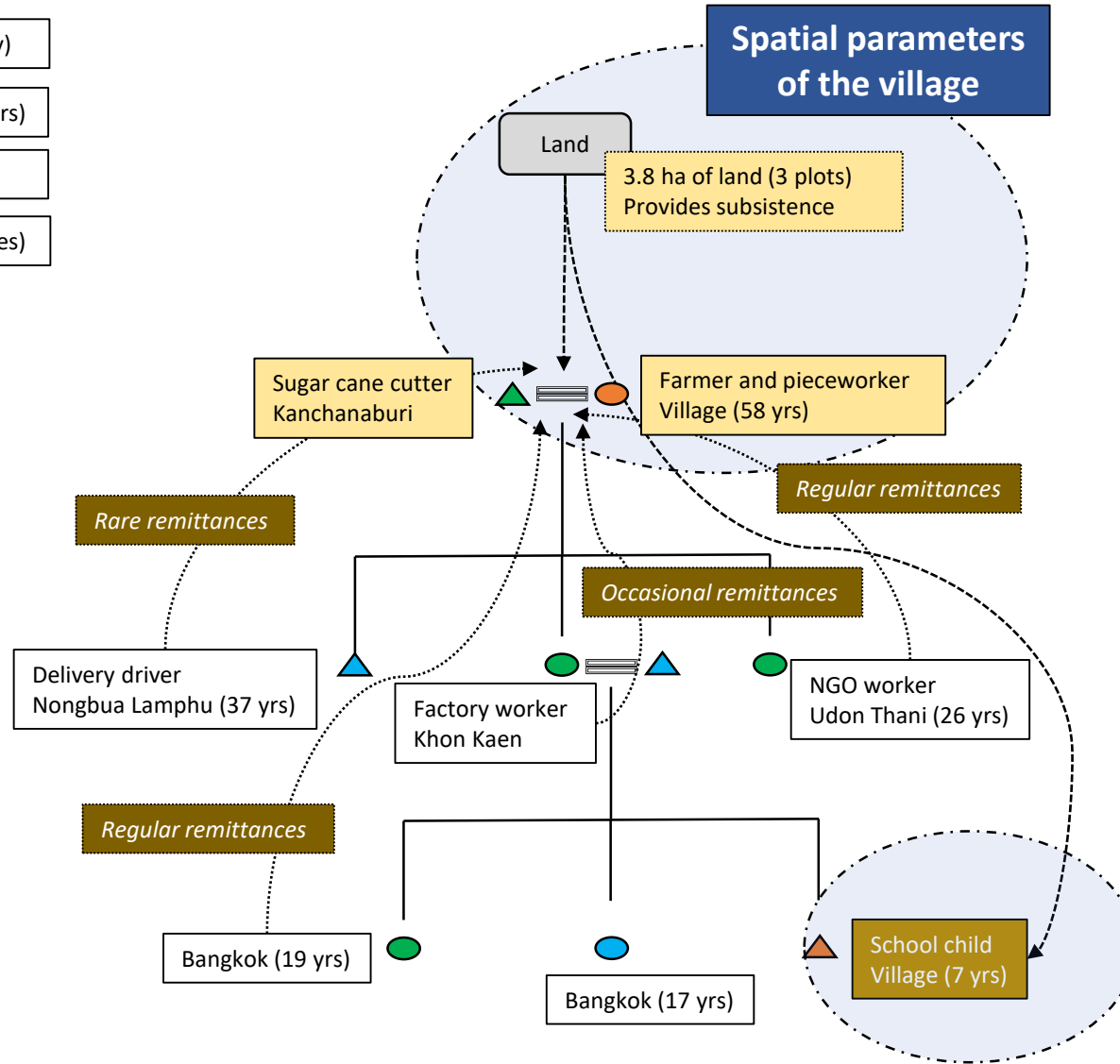
Rapid economic growth has been accompanied by a significant fall in income poverty...

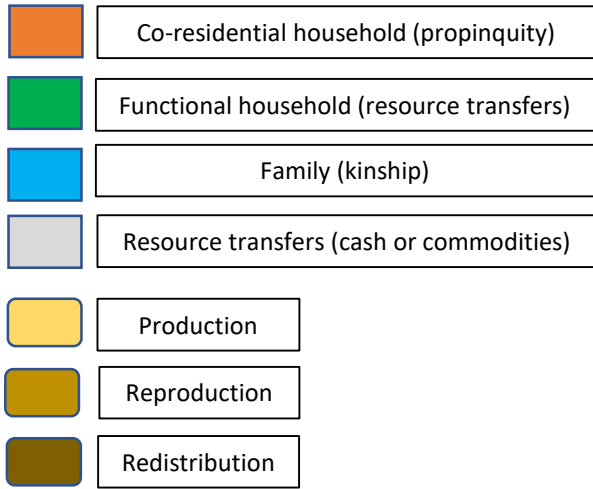
So: why is poverty so sticky?

Source: NESDC

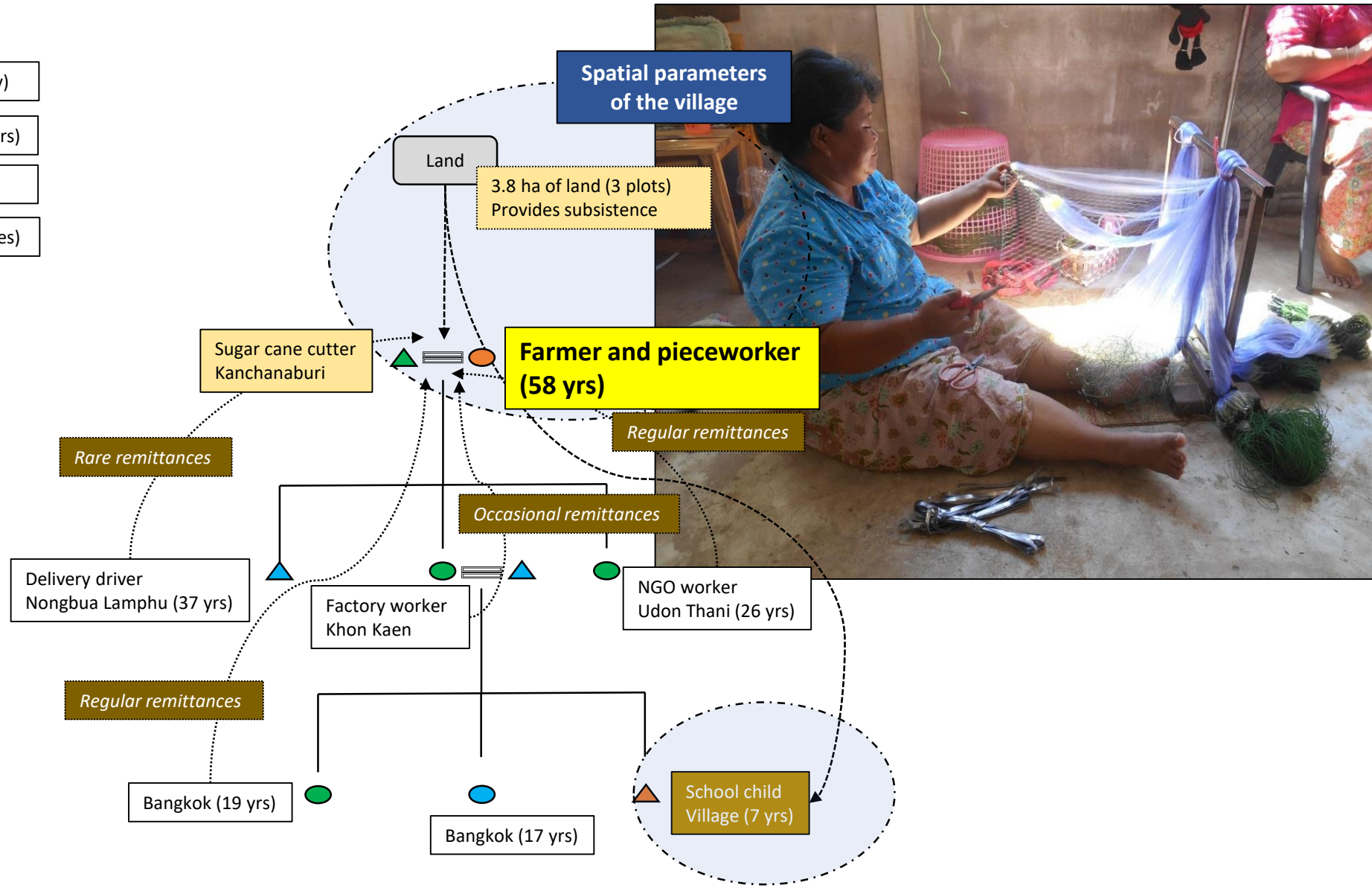


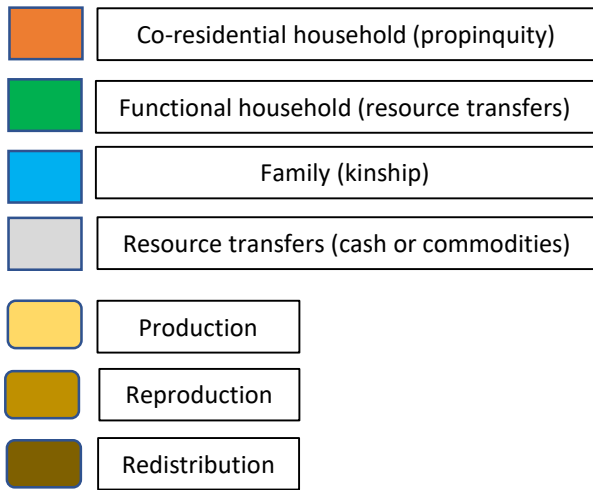
Mae Thong
 (interview: 10th February 2015 [BLKH#06])



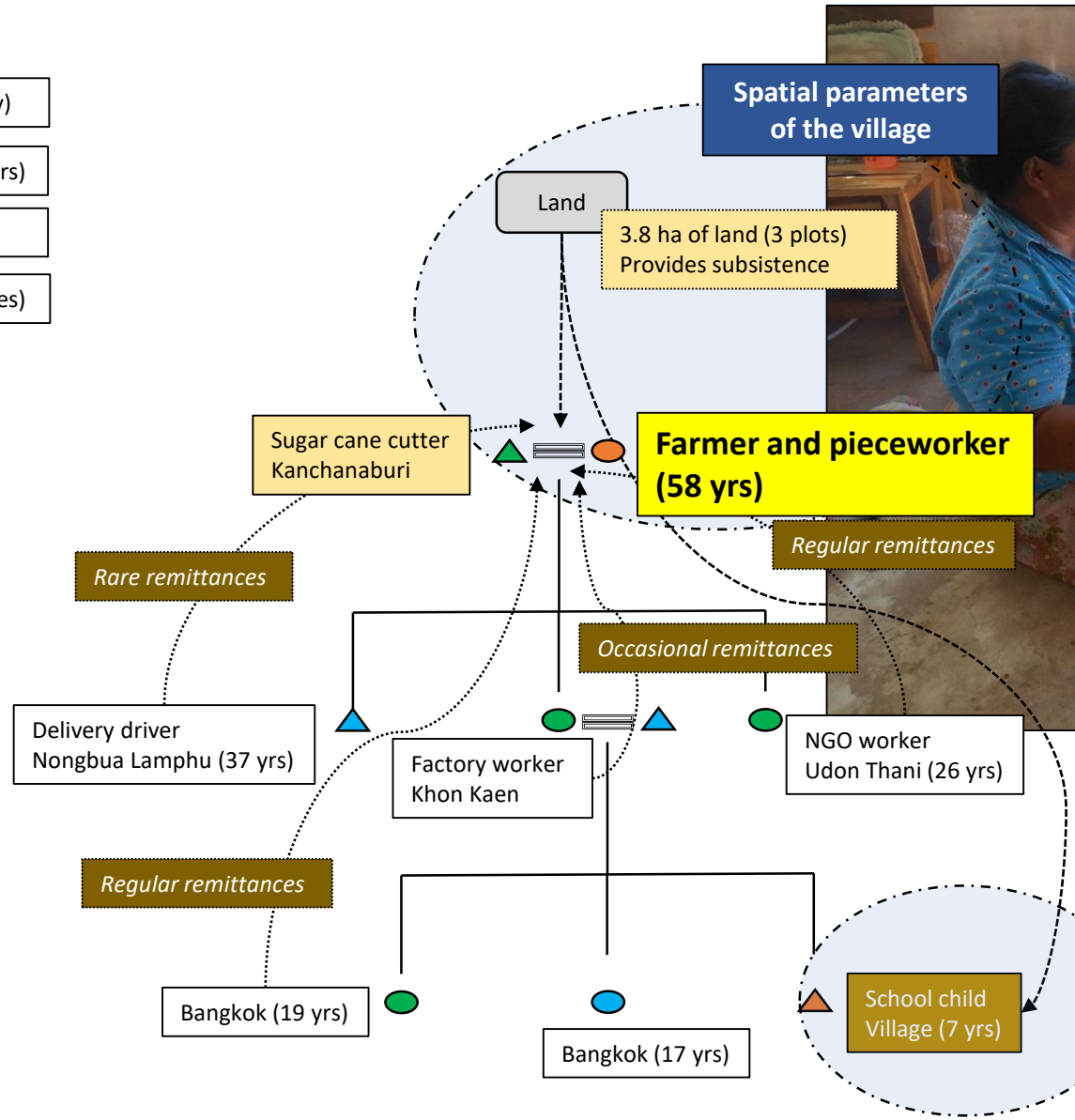


Mae Thong
 (interview: 10th February 2015 [BLKH#06])

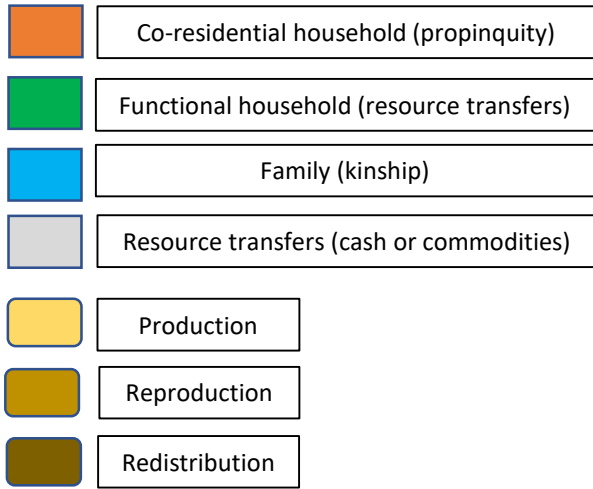




Mae Thong
 (interview: 10th February 2015 [BLKH#06])



In the morning I start at 8 o'clock until 6 o'clock in the evening. Then I cook the meal for my family and watch TV before continuing to make fishnets until 10 o'clock at night and then go to bed. I can make 10 pieces [a day, at 10 baht a piece].
 (A 58 year-old female fishnet piece worker, Ban Lao, KI#06 [10.2.15])



Spatial parameters of the village

Land
 3.8 ha of land (3 plots)
 Provides subsistence

Farmer and pieceworker (58 yrs)

Sugar cane cutter
 Kanchanaburi

Regular remittances

Occasional remittances

Rare remittances

Delivery driver
 Nongbua Lamphu (37 yrs)

Factory worker
 Khon Kaen

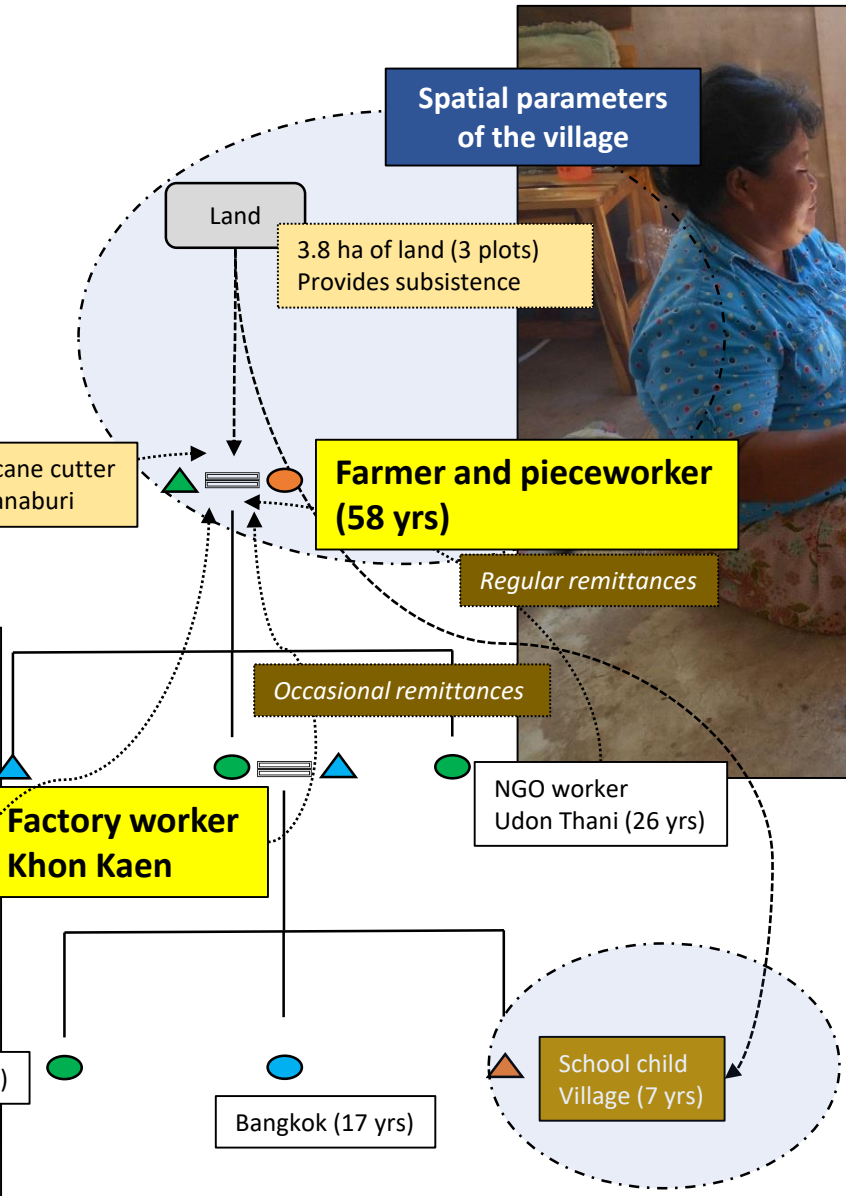
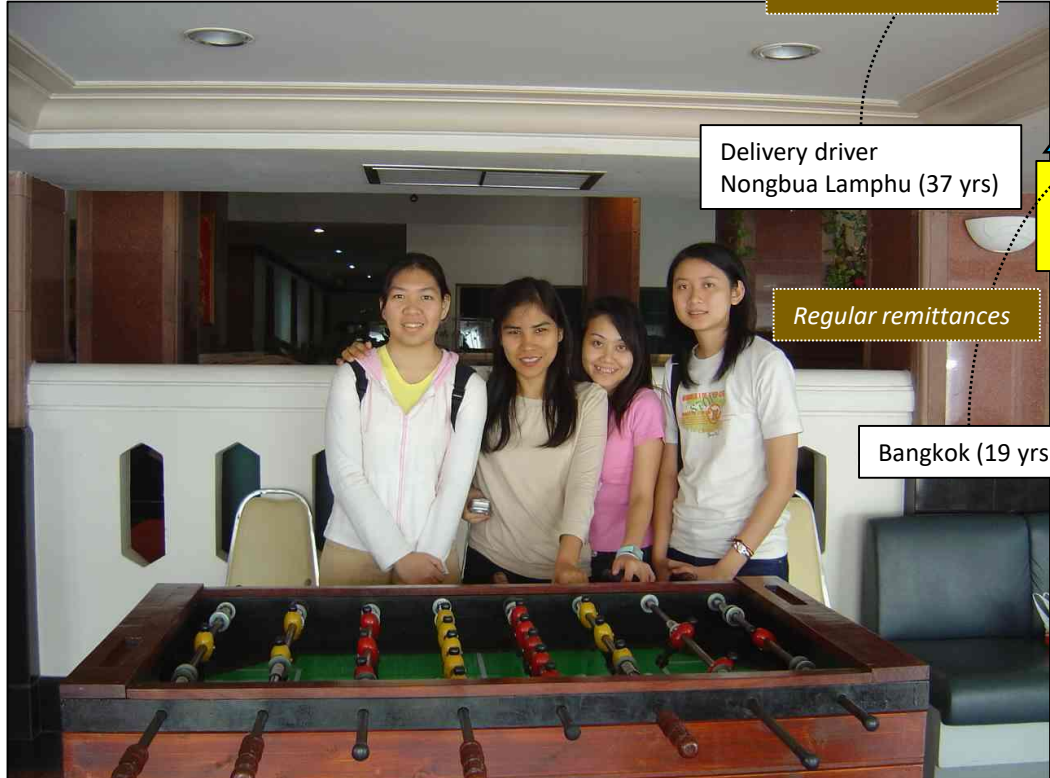
NGO worker
 Udon Thani (26 yrs)

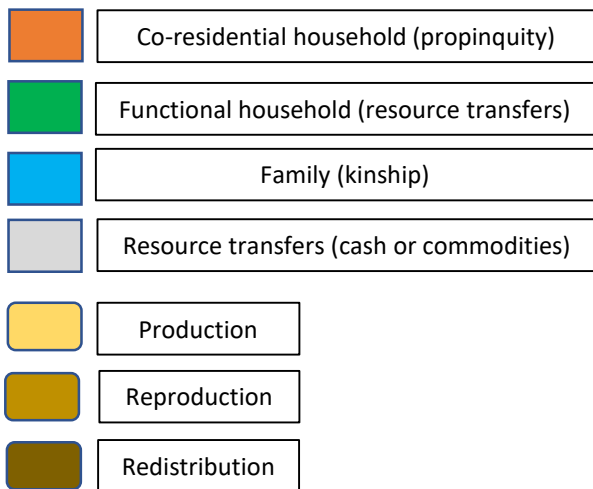
Regular remittances

Bangkok (19 yrs)

Bangkok (17 yrs)

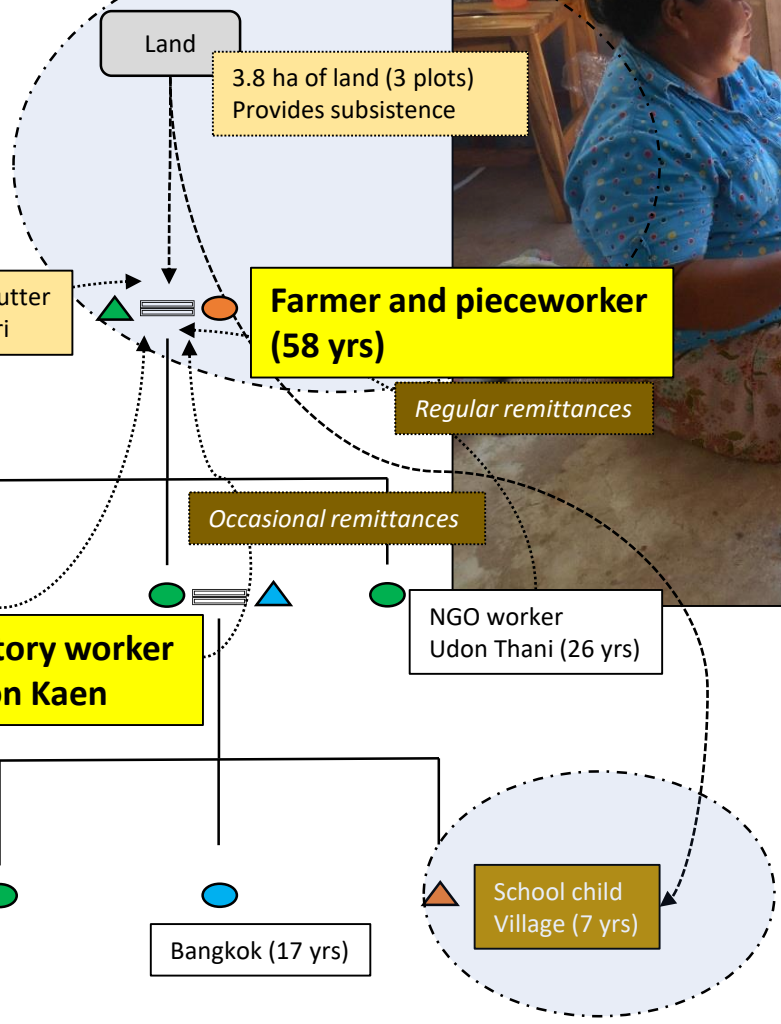
School child
 Village (7 yrs)





Informalisation of the formal economy

Spatial parameters of the village



Casualisation of the formal economy



Delivery driver Nongbua Lamphu (37 yrs)

Regular remittances

Bangkok (19 yrs)

Super-exploitation?

“If...the African economy and society is treated as standing in an ancillary relationship to the capitalist sector, then a different analysis follows. When the migrant-labourer has access to means of subsistence, outside the capitalist sector, as he does in South Africa, then the relationship between wages and the cost of the production and reproduction of labour-power is changed. *That is to say, capital is able to pay the worker below the cost of his reproduction. In the first place, since in determining the level of wages necessary for the subsistence of the migrant worker and his family, account is taken of the fact that the family is supported, to some extent, from the product of agricultural production in the Reserves, it becomes possible to fix wages at the level of subsistence of the individual worker*” (Wolpe 1972: 434 [emphasis in original]).



Poverty of past and
present

Ban Non Tae, 1983



Ban Non Tae, 2008



Ban Non Tae, 1983

Peasant
Socially rural
Income poor



Ban Non Tae, 2008



Ban Non Tae, 1983

Peasant
Socially rural
Income poor



Ban Non Tae, 2008

Post-peasant
Socially urban
Income non-poor



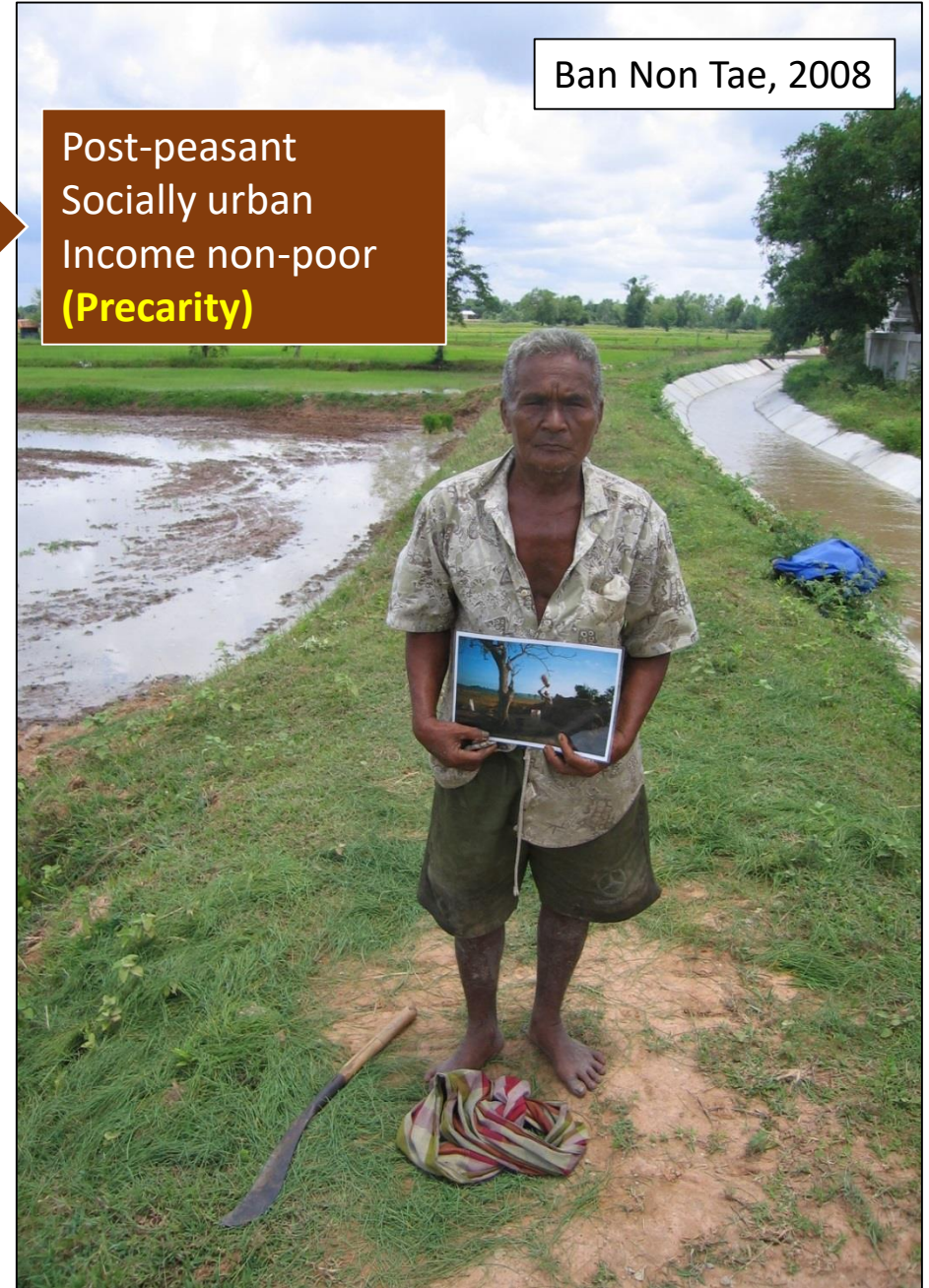
Ban Non Tae, 1983

Peasant
Socially rural
Income poor
(Vulnerability)



Ban Non Tae, 2008

Post-peasant
Socially urban
Income non-poor
(Precarity)





โอบา มาร์ค

ระเบียบการใช้ถนน กทม.

'System for road usage in Bangkok.
Monday-Friday: Let vehicles flow.
Saturday-Sunday: Let buffalos march'



จันทร์-ศุกร์ ให้รถวิ่ง



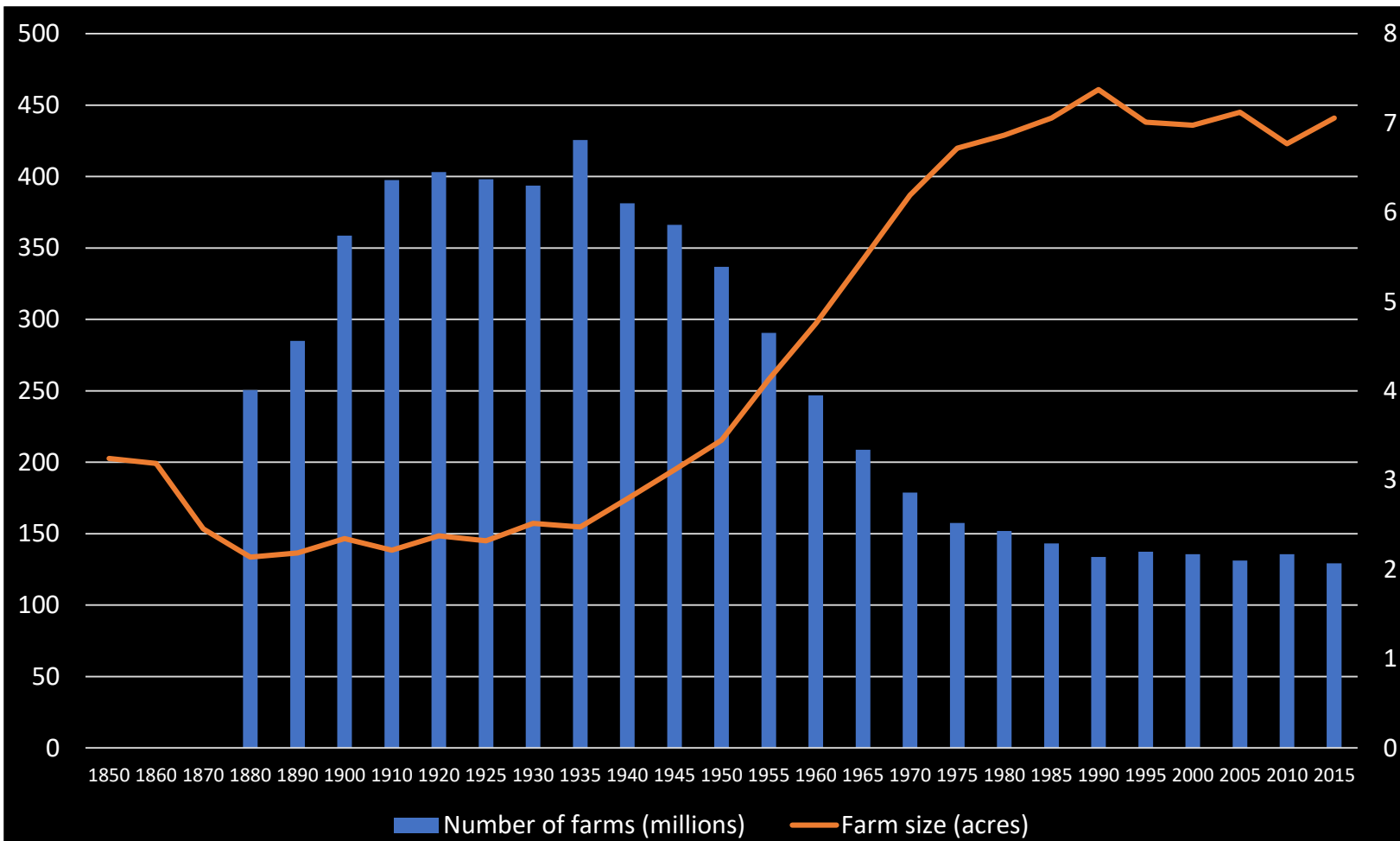
เสาร์-อาทิตย์ ให้ควาซเดิน

One last puzzle...

Why hasn't he exited farming?
(And why do we think he *should*
have exited farming?)

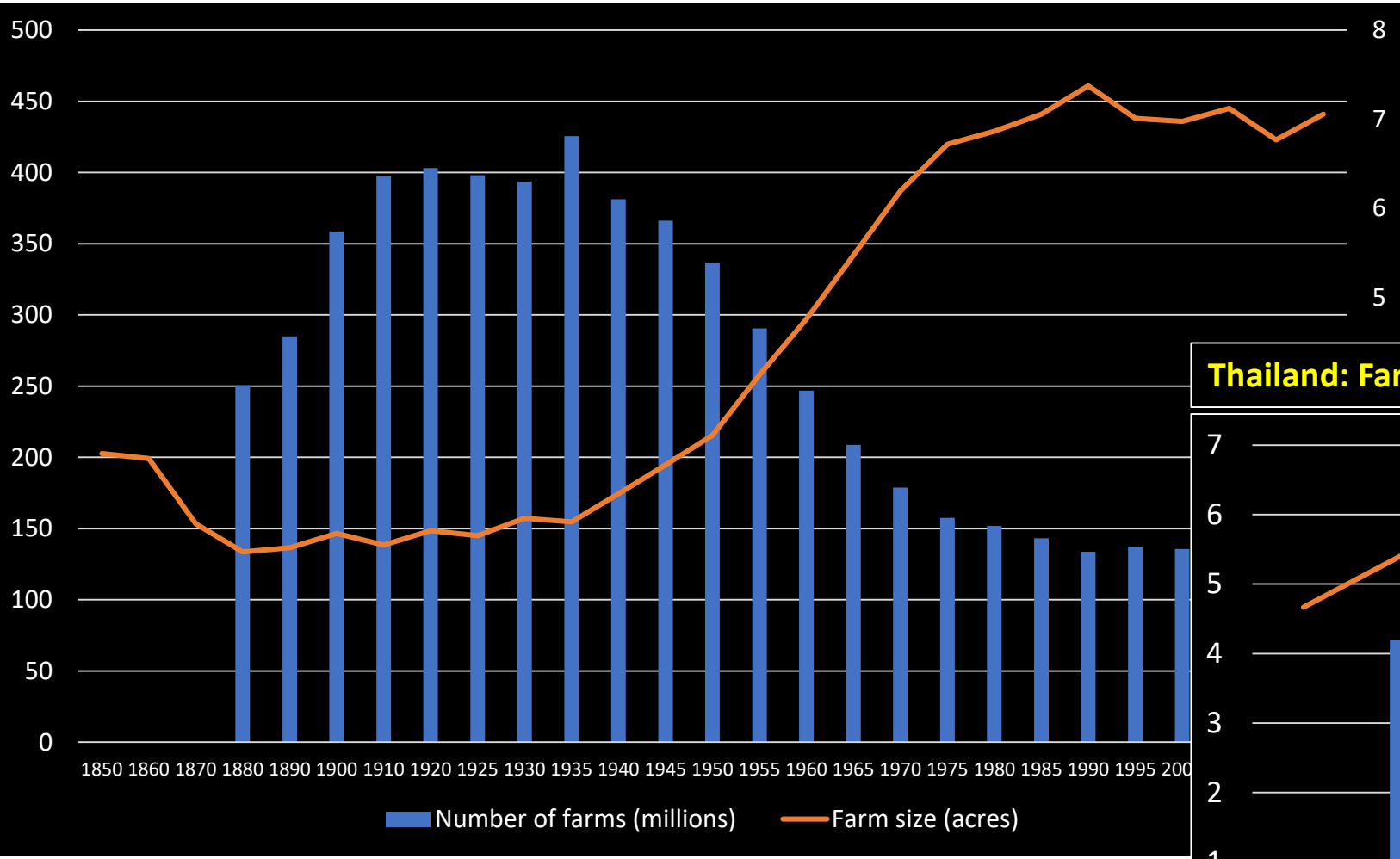


United States: Farm-size transition, 1850-2015

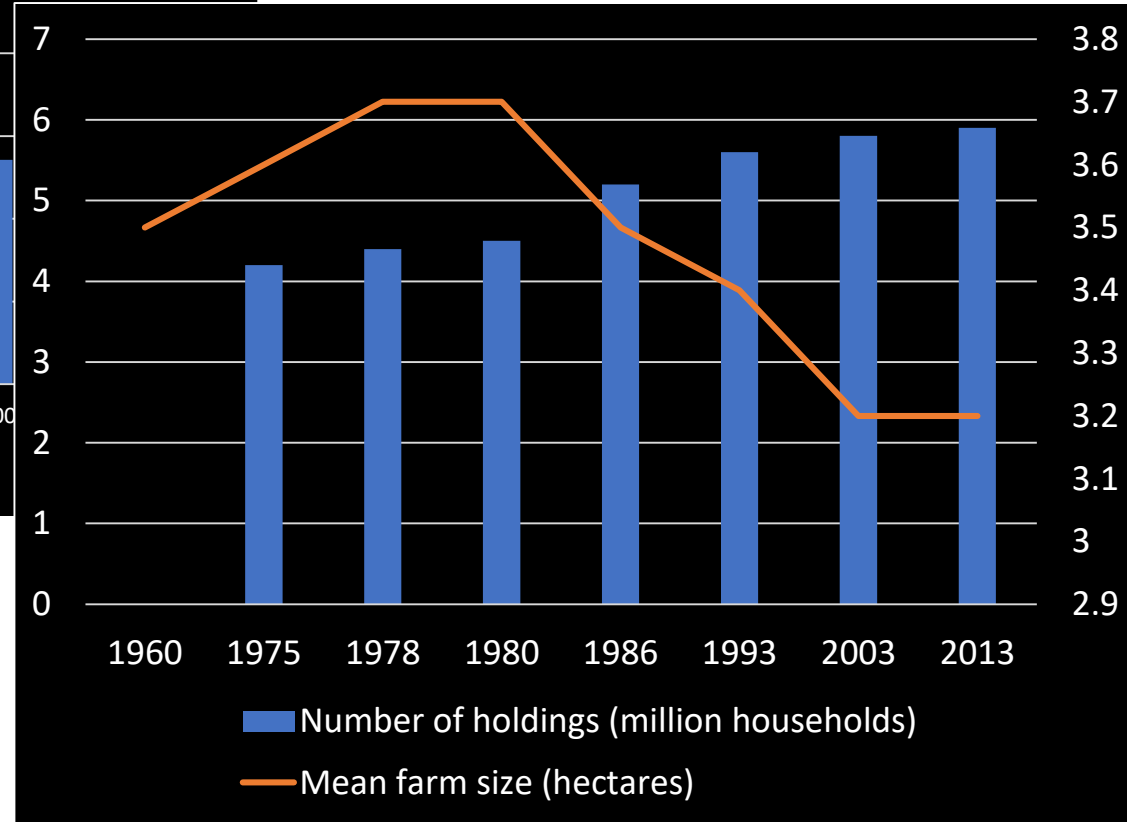


1. Because historical experience tells us that is what should happen

United States: Farm-size transition, 1850-2015



Thailand: Farm-size transition, 1960-2013



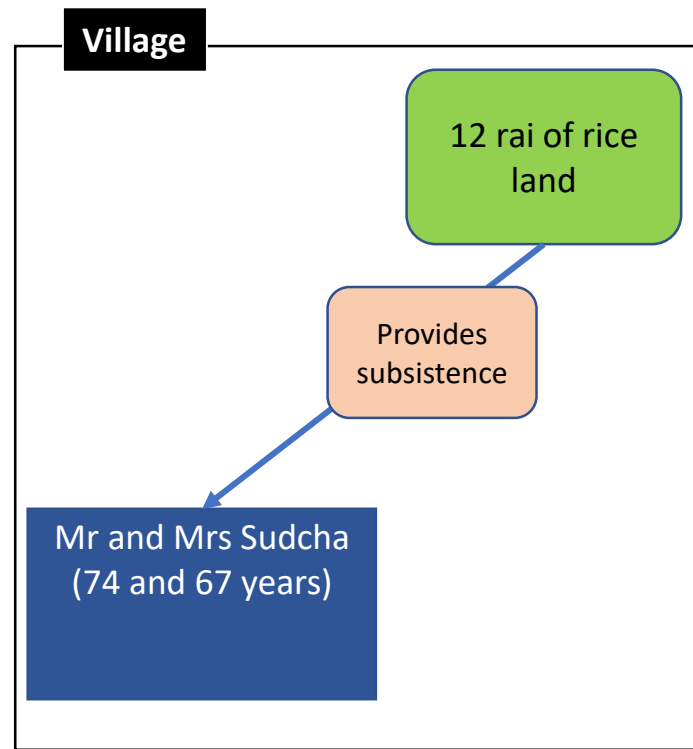


- Middle-income peasants (Walker 2012)
- Cosmopolitan villagers (Keyes 2014)
- Urbanized villagers (Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011)

1. Because historical experience tells us that is what should happen
2. Because remaining a peasant keeps people poor

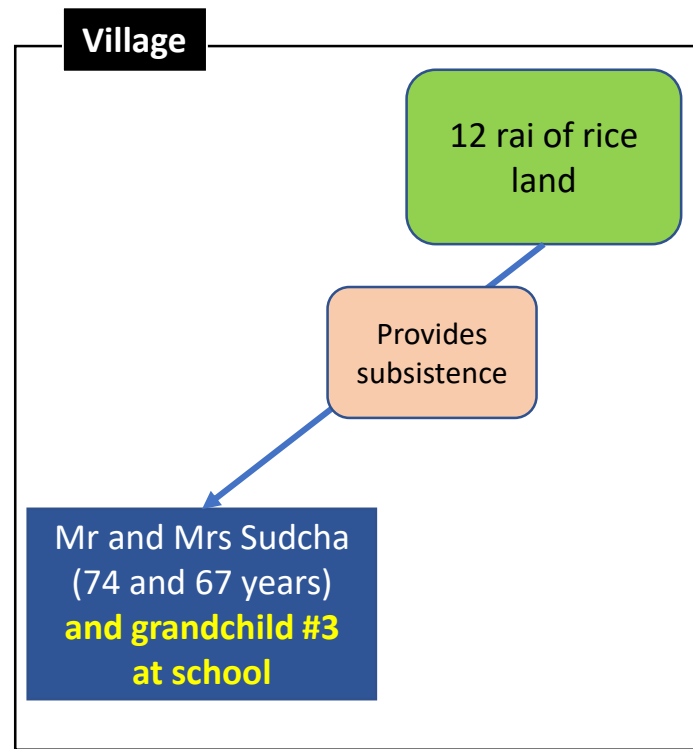
“What do we call them? ... There is no ‘them,’ That is, there is no ‘them’ to label any longer. *Thai peasants, as individuals, as households, as a class, or as a unit of analysis no longer meaningfully exist. . . . Lamphun’s peasants did not transform into a new homogenous class or social formation, but evolved to take up wholly new and multiple occupational, social, group, and generational identities*” (Dayley and Attachak Sattayanurak 2016: 63)

The truncated agrarian transition



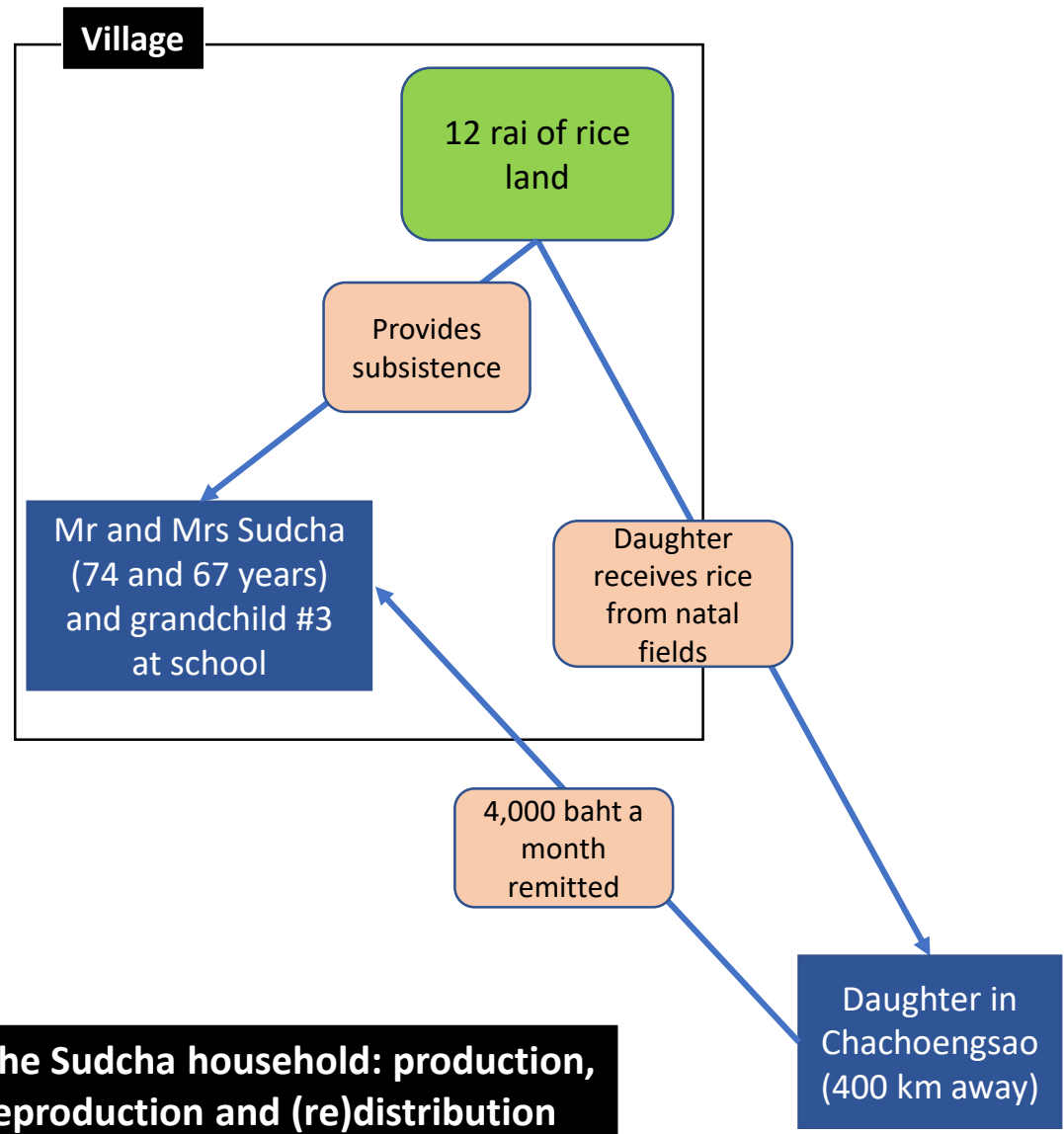
The Sudcha household: production, reproduction and (re)distribution

The truncated agrarian transition



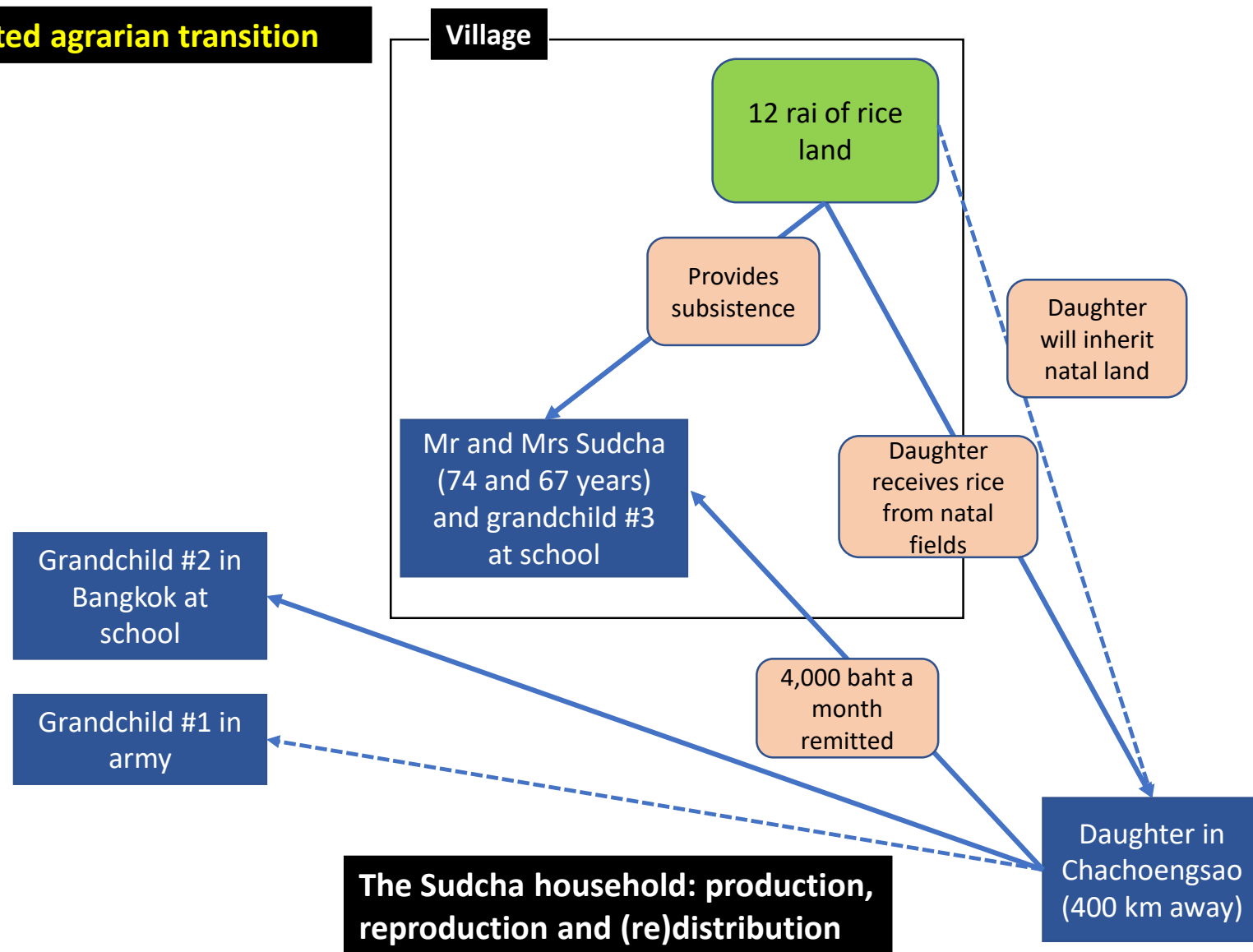
The Sudcha household: production, reproduction and (re)distribution

The truncated agrarian transition



The Sudcha household: production, reproduction and (re)distribution

The truncated agrarian transition





1982



1982



1994



1982



2008



1994

Less Poverty, More Precarity: squaring the circle of Southeast Asian development

#LSESEADevelopment

Professor Jonathan Rigg

Professor and Chair in Human Geography, University of Bristol.

Chair: Professor Hyun Bang Shin

Professor of Geography and Urban Studies and Director of Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, LSE.

Hosted by the LSE Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre