Co-Creating Sustainable Transformations in Restaurant Supply Chains in Thailand: Policy Implications

Summary

Team members

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Context

The research team comprises members from three universities in Thailand: Mahidol University (MU), Chulalongkorn University (CU), and Ubon Ratchathani University (UBU). MU and CU are leading Thai universities located in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region. UBU is the Northeastern region of Thailand. The three universities offer numerous undergraduate and graduate degrees in various fields.

Practice partner

The Thai Organic Consumer Association (TOCA) is the project partner for this transdisciplinary research. Founded in 2019, TOCA is a network of consumers and businesses sharing an interest in fostering an organic society through partnerships between organic farmers, consumers, businesses, and relevant stakeholders. TOCA aims to coordinate among partners in driving the organic society forward, support farmers to produce diversity and continuity in quantity and quality of organic products, and expand credible market access that offers fair pricing.

Study overview

The team together with TOCA studied the sustainability transformations of organic restaurant supply chains in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR) and Phuket. The study began with the sustainability assessment of the organic restaurant supply chains, followed by the visioning and back-casting workshops to set sustainability goals and strategies of the organic restaurant supply chains in BMR and Phuket. The results from the workshops were extracted and synthesized to implement the intervention on "Matching local organic farmers with café for offering organic beverages" in Phuket.

Study results

Empirical results showed that the organic restaurant supply chains had significant progress in socio-cultural and governance dimensions, but needed to take more efforts in the economic, and environmental and welfare dimensions. To enhance sustainability in the supply chains, engaging all relevant stakeholders to set mutual goals was shown as a crucial step, and connecting stakeholders to promote the use of organic ingredients and the provision of organic foods was a viable strategy.

Policy Recommendations

1. Aligning the sustainability concerns and interests of upstream and downstream stakeholders is a foundation for sustainability transformations.
2. Monitoring data on resource use and waste, and promoting sustainable innovations at the farm level should be promoted to Thai farmers.
3. Having more platforms to upstream stakeholders and emphasizing the roles of intermediaries are needed to mobilize the provision of organic foods.
4. Communicating with consumers about organic food should not be limited to health benefits (personal benefits), but should expand to the local culture and sustainability at large.

Research Findings

Research questions

1) What is the sustainability of the current state of the organic food (restaurant) supply chain in the BMR and Phuket?
2) What are the visions of key stakeholders (farmers, restaurants, and consumers) on sustainable food consumption?
3) What are the strategies and action plans to achieve mutually compatible visions of SFSC?

Research significance

Climate change, pandemics, and wars reveal unsustainable features of conventional, globalized food supply chains, including significant GHG emissions, food insecurity, increasing food prices, injustices against workers, and dependence on trade partners violating human rights. Various efforts have been undertaken to transform food supply chains (FSCs) towards sustainability by reducing transport, paying fair prices, adding value in the region of origin, adopting worker safety standards, and increasing accountability along the supply chain from production to consumption. Cooperative business models (such as worker or consumer cooperatives) and cooperative governance (such as food policy councils or community-supported agriculture) were adopted in

many countries. Yet, there is little empirical, comparative research on how to implement sustainable food supply chains (SFSCs) through cooperative models. Research suggests the need for rapid implementation of sustainable agri-food systems solutions to avoid exacerbation of detrimental climate change, economic injustices, and negative health impacts. There is increasing research interest in investigating FSCs, cooperative food businesses, and cooperative governance for advancing sustainability. Analytical, anticipatory, and strategic sustainability research is extended into transdisciplinary real-world experiments to create actionable knowledge for sustainable agri-food systems.

In Thailand, consumers have a restricted range of options in terms of accessing organic food. Typically, Thai people can only obtain organic produce from specialized stores, selected supermarkets, and organized local markets. Most organic food options offered through these distribution channels are fresh produce. The provision of fresh organic food was incompatible with the modern lifestyles of many Thai consumers, especially urban consumers who do not have time to cook. Although eating out is the most predominant consumption practice among Thai consumers, there is currently a scarcity of organic restaurants. This scenario presents an opportunity to enhance the promotion of organic food in restaurants, particularly in urban areas, such as the BMR, and tourist areas, such as Phuket. Therefore, restaurants that serve organic meals are a potential means to encourage the consumption of organic food.

Researchers from Mahidol University, Ubon Ratchathani University, and Chulalongkorn University, in cooperation with local practice partners, conduct research to promote sustainable restaurant supply chains in BMR and Phuket. The focus is on restaurants as intermediary cooperative food businesses and their supply chains. Research includes an assessment of the current state of sustainability (baseline); visioning workshops with farmers, restaurants, and consumers; as well as strategy development for enhancing sustainable food offerings in restaurants while fulfilling consumers' preferences. Transdisciplinary research is conducted together with TOCA and their farmer and restaurant partners in BMR and Phuket.

Research findings

Empirical results showed that the organic restaurant supply chains had significant progress in socio-cultural and governance dimensions, but needed to take more efforts in the economic, and environmental and welfare dimensions. Highlighted aspects of socio-cultural and governance include actor relationships, traditional food, communication, and certification. For the under-addressed economic and environmental aspects, they include price fairness, waste reduction, and food miles are well-recognized, but issues like local employment, energy efficiency, and water use.

Concerning shared sustainability interests of stakeholders, the overall sustainability interests and strategies in BMR are about promoting chemical-free agriculture (and banning agricultural chemicals), as well as promoting food and agriculture education and organic food networks, together with integrated organic food platforms and databases. The overarching sustainability interests and strategies in Phuket are about growing and utilizing local, sustainable foods to promote the economy through more connected collaborations from all stakeholders.

In conclusion, engaging all relevant stakeholders to set mutual goals was shown as a crucial step to enhance sustainability in the supply chains, and connecting stakeholders to promote the use of organic ingredients and the provision of organic foods was a viable strategy.

Conclusion

Empirical results of this transdisciplinary research showed that the organic restaurant supply chains had significant progress in socio-cultural and governance dimensions, but needed to take more efforts in the economic, and environmental and welfare dimensions. Highlighted aspects of socio-cultural and governance include actor relationships, traditional food, communication, and certification. For the under-addressed economic and environmental aspects, they include price fairness, waste reduction, and food miles are well-recognized, but issues like local employment, energy efficiency, and water use.

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The empirical results of this transdisciplinary research offer the following recommendations:

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2. Monitoring data on resource use and waste, and promoting sustainable innovations at the farm level should be promoted to Thai farmers.
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