



ISSN NO. 2320-5407

Journal Homepage: -www.journalijar.com

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/13819
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/13819>



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ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)
ISSN 2320-5407
Journal Homepage: <http://www.journalijar.com>
Journal DOI:10.21474/IJAR01

RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOODS IN VIETNAM: A CASE STUDY IN THAI BINH CITY

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 29 September 2021

Final Accepted: 31 October 2021

Published: November 2021

Key words:-

Sustainable Livelihood, Sustainable Development Of Livelihood, Household Livelihood, Livelihood Challenge

Abstract

The study of household livelihoods has been a familiar research topic, especially in developing countries. This research used the following methods namely document analysis, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires to point out the challenge for the sustainable development of household livelihoods in peri-urban areas. The sample of questionnaire survey and in-depth interview was 298 and 30 representatives of agricultural households, correspondingly. This research was conducted in Thai Binh city that is located in the northern coastal region of Vietnam. The results showed that there are 2 major challenges for the sustainable development of household livelihoods: the natural resources and human capital challenges. In addition, there were other challenges such as consumer market, livelihood transformation strategy, and economic capital challenges. Last but not least, some suggestions were proposed to solve those challenges mentioned.

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Introduction:-

Hunger eradication and poverty reduction, and sustainable economic development for people are important goals of every country. Recognizing the significance of developing household livelihoods in particular, in each region, and professional fields in general, Vietnam has introduced many strategies and plans for socio-economic development together with the conference decisions on sustainable development; which emphasized the sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas. Therefore, the topic of household livelihoods has received the attention of many scientists in Vietnam such as "Using social capital in livelihood strategies of farmers in the outskirts of Ha Noi under the impact of urbanization" (Nguyen, D. T., 2007), "Livelihood strategy in craft villages" (Nguyen, X. M., 2008), "Solutions to improve household livelihoods in forest stands in Ca Mau coastal area" (Pham, H. B. et al, 2010), "Effects of converting agricultural land to non-agricultural land on livelihoods of farmers whose land has been acquired in Hoi An city, Quang Nam province"(Huynh, V. C., 2010) and so on.

Thai Binh- an agriculture city is located in the northern coastal region of Vietnam, is in a transition period from the pure agriculture production type to the mixed types. The peri-urban areas of Thai Binh city are in the context of urbanization (Cao, B., 2019), so the sustainable transformation of the livelihoods of households also poses more challenges than ever before.

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Based on the collected data, the article aims to point out challenges for the sustainable development of household livelihoods in peri-urban areas, thereby proposing some solutions for these difficulties which suburb farming households are facing.

Concepts

Livelihood

Livelihood is a concept that can be used in many ways, with many different meanings. Understanding in the common sense of Vietnamese, livelihood means "career", "way of earning a living"; this understanding is synonymous with the explanation in the Vietnamese dictionary: "work to earn a living, to make a living" (Dictionary Center, 2007: 1064).

In 1991, Chambers and Conway introduced a new definition that livelihood is a means of ensuring people's living. Livelihoods can be considered at different levels, in which household-scale livelihoods are the most common (Chambers, R. et al, 1991:10).

Then, the definition of livelihood was also proposed by Chambers and Conway after revising the definition of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED): livelihood includes capabilities, assets (stocks, stores, resources, rights, and accessibility), and activities required for a means of survival; a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance capacities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and contribute to net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels, in the short and long term (Chambers, R. et al, 1991: 10). This definition was revised by Department for International Development (DFID) in 1999 to become the most accessible definition:

“A sustainable livelihood is commonly accepted as comprising: the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base” (DFID 1999).

From these above perspectives, livelihood includes activities of people/households that are based on using natural, human, and capital resources, to achieve livelihood outcomes. In addition, DFID's sustainable livelihood framework also referred that livelihood is influenced by policy institutions, and social relationships that each individual and household establishes in the community.

Sustainable livelihood

Before the concept of sustainable livelihoods was officially declared, the concept has been mentioned in several studies. The report of the WCED referred to this concept that “sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987:16)

Many researchers' perspectives on sustainable development only focus on the effective use of natural resources. However, indeed sustainable development is required to pay attention to other factors such as socio-economic development, hunger eradication, and poverty reduction, solving the problem of underemployment, environmental quality improvement, green lifestyle, and recovering natural resources.

Based on the viewpoint of sustainable development, scientists proposed concepts of sustainable livelihood as follows.

Lasse Krantz (2001) argued that sustainable livelihoods is an attempt at approaches to poverty reduction because these approaches only focus on certain aspects or indicators of poverty (low income), but not inclusiveness (vulnerability, social exclusion). Krantz made a comparison based on the sustainable livelihood concepts of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe (CARE), and DFID. In which, sustainable livelihood was considered the most effective method to eliminate poverty in the current volatile context, especially in rural areas. The author also pointed out three main goals that need to be done to develop sustainable livelihoods for the poor:

- 1) Finding out exactly what is preventing or limiting the poor and then finding the right support activities;

- 2) Enhancing and improving the weaknesses of the poor (health, education, access to social services, morale, and low self-esteem), reduce risks;
- 3) The poor themselves know their situation and their priority needs the most, so they must participate in the development of policies and projects (Lasse Krantz 2001).

Scoones considered that a livelihood is sustainable when it can handle or recover from crises; maintain or enhance existing capabilities and resources without harming natural resources” (Scoones, 1998: 5).

A livelihood is sustainable when it can adapt to sudden changes and bounce back, and maintain or enhance capabilities and resources both now and in the future, without degrading the base natural resources (DFID, 1999).

In summary, to sustainably develop their livelihoods, households need to clearly understand their family's limitations, thereby building long-term strategies, properly combining the resources, be able to resist and recover from a crisis. This is also the reason why the article analyzes the difficulties and challenges of farm households in peri-urban areas, thereby proposing solutions for these households to find suitable activities to overcome.

Methodology:-

The data was based on the research results of the project called "*Changing livelihoods of the households in agricultural production in the peri-urban areas of Thai Binh city in the process of urbanization*" by the authors. The data was collected from methods including document analysis, in-depth interview, observation, and questionnaire survey at 3 communes: Dong Tho, Vu Lac, Tan Binh in Thai Binh city, Vietnam. Samples were selected by convenience.

From the experience of previous research, a household is chosen as the research object for the research (Chambers, R. et al, 1991: 10). Therefore the questionnaire was designed to collect the current issues related livelihood of the household. The sample size of the questionnaire survey was 298 people who are representative of households engaged in agricultural production. Besides, we also conducted 30 in-depth interviews to obtain a qualitative database for the research. Moreover, we used documents to review and analyze definitions, theories, data of previous researchers, and statistics of the Statistical Office of Thai Binh Province which is related to our results.

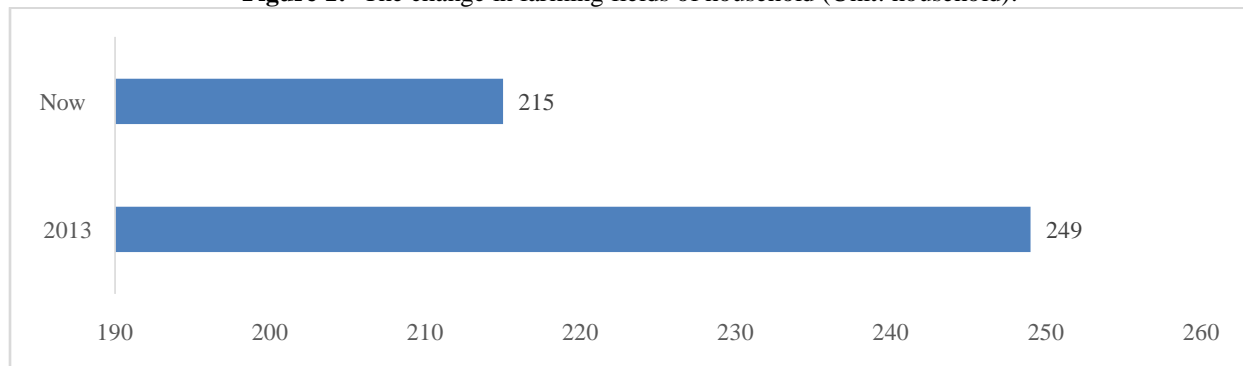
Challenges of sustainable development of farming household's livelihood in the peri-urban area

This research will mention to challenges of livelihood sustainable development of households namely natural resource, human resource, and other challenges.

Natural resources challenge

Urbanization and climate change significantly affect natural resources including land, water, climate, weather, and so on. These are the resources that farm households use to support livelihood activities. While sustainable development focuses on the effective use of natural resources, sustainable livelihoods focus on how much and how long natural resources can be used effectively. Regarding the current land use, 64.1% of households still had farmland; 57.4% of those owned mixed garden land; 5.7% of households had pond/lake/swampland. However, more and more households abandoned their crop fields, their productivity of crops was reduced as well.

Figure 1:- The change in farming fields of household (Unit: household).



Source: Results of authors' research.

The data also shows that the number of households cultivated has decreased by 11.4%, compared to that number in 2013. However, in reality, the number of households leaving fields empty and reducing food productivity was even higher.

Table 1:- Change in area and production of other cereals and rice by communes.

| Year Commune | Other cereals | | | | Rice | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|------|------------------|------|-----------|-------|------------------|------|
| | Area (ha) | | Production (ton) | | Area (ha) | | Production (ton) | |
| | 2013 | 2017 | 2013 | 2017 | 2013 | 2017 | 2013 | 2017 |
| Dong Tho | 281 | 281 | 1742 | 1690 | 280.3 | 280.6 | 1750 | 1585 |
| Vu Lac | 930 | 879 | 6101 | 5220 | 900 | 860.6 | 5805 | 4845 |
| Tan Binh | 242 | 231 | 1476 | 1050 | 230 | 210.1 | 1380 | 1183 |

Source: Thai Binh Statistical Yearbook 2017 (Thai Binh Statistical Office, 2017: 63-68)

Among the reasons explaining the abandonment of fields and planting food crops, the factor caused by the rat epidemic was given the most by the people. Rats, pests, extreme weather, and climate created difficulties in agricultural production; the area of rice and grain decreased leading to a reduction in productivity. In order to prevent and solve these problems, it is necessary to have unified and synchronized measures of all households in the commune. In addition, these measures must ensure standards on environmental protection and sustainable green development. Therefore, it is necessary to have the combination of co-operatives and all of the households because otherwise, the problem will not be completely eradicated, and waste money.

“My family, alone, can't eliminate rat epidemic. Rats keep moving from field to field and even return to my field. If we want to hire a co-operative's members, it should be enough requirements from families.” (Female, 60 years old, Dong Tho commune).

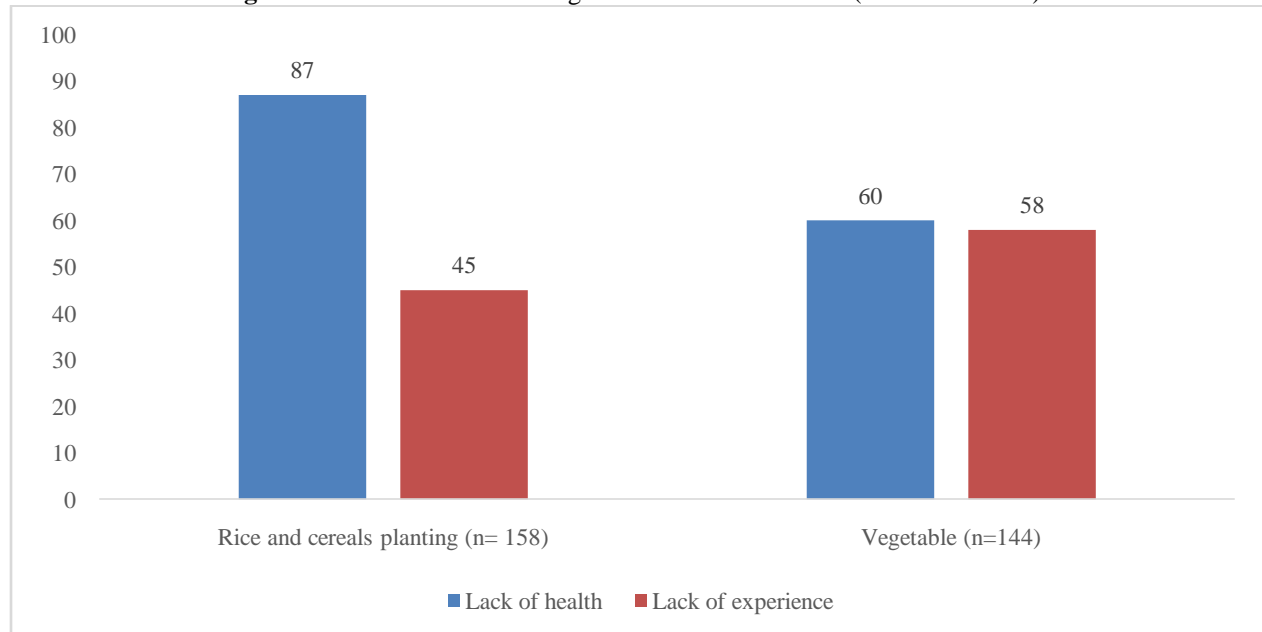
According to the interview, abandoned land was partly due to the difficult conversion of land use and crop types. Some villagers wanted to change the purpose of farming from farmland to garden land to grow fruit trees and other trees with greater economic benefits but it has not been approved by the commune authorities.

“I also asked to change the purpose of land using from planting food crops to growing clean vegetables, but the commune authorities did not allow it” (Male, 62 years old, Dong Tho commune).

This is also a suggestion in policy-making to avoid loss of natural capital. Local authorities should encourage and create conditions for people to implement sustainable livelihood strategies such as farming clean agricultural products, organizing green-standard fields and organic farming models, etc, to increase the income and contribute to the preservation of the environment.

Human resources challenges

The challenge of human resources, especially in terms of quality, is also one of the biggest issues in the sustainable development of household livelihoods. The quality of human resources is measured by the attainment of health, skills, experience, and knowledge of workers. When being asked about the types of difficulties encountered when participating in cultivation, 87 households said that they were facing health difficulties when growing rice fields compared to 60 households involved in these difficulties when growing vegetables. While, lacking of experience in cultivating rice and vegetable was the problem of 45 and 58 households, correspondingly.

Figure 2:- Difficulties of farming household in cultivation (Unit: household).

Source: Results of authors' research

Discussing more the challenge about human resource quality, the households were asked to self-assess the attainment of the current labor in the household to the two main branches of agriculture, namely planting and ranching. On a scale of 3 levels: Full, partial and not attainment, 4 criteria including knowledge, skills, experience, health, are evaluated. The results show below:

Table 2:- Level of attainment of knowledge, skills, experience, and health in agriculture production (Unit: household).

| Level of attainment | Factors | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------|--------|------------|--------|
| | Knowledge | Skills | Experience | Health |
| Planting (N=215) | | | | |
| Full | 93 | 97 | 107 | 68 |
| Partial | 122 | 118 | 108 | 136 |
| None | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 |
| Ranching (N=100) | | | | |
| Full | 23 | 30 | 39 | 51 |
| Partial | 77 | 70 | 61 | 47 |
| None | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |

Source: Results of authors' research

As a result, it can be seen that most of the households only partially met the requirement of the knowledge, skills, experience, and health for both planting and ranching. In general, the result also indicated that the attainment level of skills, knowledge, and experience was better than that of health. The farmers who were attached to the field were now old, they were no longer healthy enough to do hard work; while, the youngsters chose to develop their academic career or find jobs in factories and companies to get a higher income. Besides, the people who were attached to traditional agriculture here often had a low ability to apply science and technology in cultivation, so they did not know how to improve productivity, quality, and cost of products.

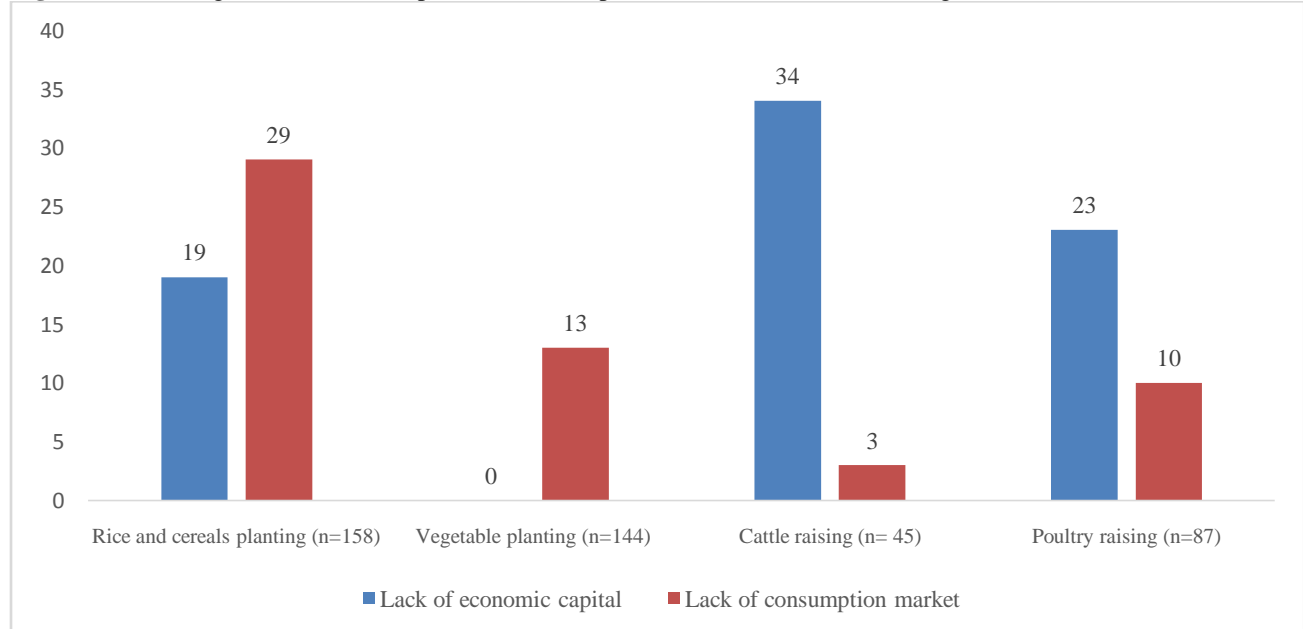
Moreover, selling processed agricultural products is likely to generate higher profits than raw products but very few households realized or did that. For instance, some households processed chicken meat to various dishes or made bean sprouts instead of sold raw beans to get a much higher profit.

Thus, a barrier to labor quality was a huge problem to develop a household's sustainable livelihoods. In order to have a sustainable livelihood, farm households not only need to improve their health but also their skills, knowledge, and experience, along with the maintenance and development of the number of labor in the household. Only when households have qualified human resources, will they have a good livelihood development plan to maximize their potential.

Other challenges

Besides the two major challenges mentioned above, there were some challenges such as consumer market, livelihood transformation strategies, and economic capital resources.

Figure 3:- Challenges of economic capital and consumption market in some fields of agriculture (Unit: household)



Source: Results of authors' research.

It can be seen that the difficulty of economic capital lacking in ranching was more than that in crops production and vice versa, the problem of lacking of market in planting was more than that in raising livestock. The challenge about the market was a problem that has been identified for a long time with agricultural households. The fact that people could not find a long-term consumption source leads to the low value of agricultural products. Almost all farming families in the peri-urban areas of Thai Binh city produced agriculture for self-sufficiency; Most of the products were sold to the neighbors and people around, so profits were not high. They also did not know how to contact traders and export markets. Those were the reason why farming was a hard-working field but low income that makes more and more people leave the field, or even give up farming to participate in other fields.

"My family farm for self-sufficient, we grow clean foods and vegetable for family members. If we don't use it all, we will raw products for the neighbors and relatives surrounding who need, with cheaper price than that at the shops." (Female, 58 years old, Dong Tho commune).

"I don't know how to advertise the products on the internet or Facebook. You know, people around here buy products and I serve." (Male, 60 years old, Dong Tho commune).

In addition, the challenges of owning economic resources were also mentioned. That means farm households did not have enough financial resources, facilities, infrastructures, or were unable to access loans to develop their agricultural activities. Most of the households in the study site did not own agricultural machines themselves but rented them from the co-operatives. They also did not dare to borrow money because of the procedures barrier and fear of not being able to repay. Thus, although some households have livelihood strategies to develop household economy, those strategies are not really sustainable because those depend too much on external factors.

"My family didn't get a loan. I was worried that I can not repay a loan on time." (Female, 48 years old, Tan Binh commune)

"I got a loan from my siblings to buy chickens and I tried my best to repay it on time... It would be the same if I had a loan from a bank. In addition, the interest of unofficial organizations will be exorbitant and who dare to get involved the gangsters" (Female, 61 years old, Vu Lac commune).

Those reasons cause the decrease household's income. Besides, people also did not dare to develop breakthrough strategies to develop the household economy.

The challenge of the household's livelihood transformation strategy depends on the combination of some factors, namely human resources, natural resources, financial resources, and social capital resources. Having a sustainable livelihood or a good livelihood transformation depends a lot on making a good transition plan, which means having resources and having a proper strategy to combine them. Having resources but not having a good strategy to combine resources properly or having a positive strategy but not having enough resources to implement the strategy both cause unsustainable livelihood or does not meet the expected results.

"I intended to borrow money from relatives to let my daughter go abroad to work to earn money. After that, she will have the capital to do business to earn little money to protect herself in old age" (Female, 61 years old, Vu Lac commune).

"I also wanted to expand production scale but couldn't find employees. Now finding people to work is very difficult. It seemed like people do not want to do hard-working job. I have contacted to 10 people but all of them just work for a few days then they quit". (Female, 51 years old, Tan Binh commune)

Thus, it is clearly seen that there were many challenges posed in the sustainable development of household livelihoods, the two main challenges were human and natural resources. These two resources were also affected by other challenges and were impacted by urbanization.

Conclusion And Recommendation:-

Besides the positive aspects of urbanization, reality shows that there were many challenges for the sustainable development of farm households' livelihoods in the outskirts of Thai Binh province. These challenges created great barriers that prevent households from being able to develop their family's livelihood, causing poverty.

From the results, the productivity of local was decreasing, the situation of pests and diseases was being worse, the conversion structure of crops was not flexible, people were not active in accessing new production methods, there was no long-term livelihood strategy, and there were not enough resources to develop a sustainable livelihood strategy. To solve these problems, it is necessary to have more appropriate policies and mechanisms that provide a better guide for people and authorities at all levels in creating and developing livelihoods. Research on challenges to livelihood development is essential to solving the problem of poverty reduction. Thus, to develop the livelihoods of rural households in the peri-urban areas of Thai Binh city, it is necessary to:

Firstly, improve agricultural production capacity in terms of productivity and quality, associated with environmentally friendly technology. Local authorities and co-operatives need to link agricultural production households together to develop qualified and high-tech farming zones; combine with the processing industry, and find stable output for agricultural products.

Second, local authorities along with co-operatives need to provide clear guidance, develop flexible policies about crops structure, change land use purposes, and create conditions for people to change planting structure but do not cause loss or waste of land resources. Besides, it is necessary to train people on sustainable and highly economic forms of agricultural cultivation; restructuring in the direction of agricultural production associated with the processing industry to increase benefits.

Third, organize training courses to guide households to improve their knowledge, skills, and experience in agricultural production. Local authorities, cooperatives, and households need to combine a variety of measures to prevent pests and animals harmful to crops asynchronously and effectively.

Fourth, households need to be proactive in innovating their production methods as well as determining their long-term product development strategies.

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