

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

Saka Bahadur^{1*}, Thazin Win², Bibi Shafeena Khan³

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines why smallholder farmers in Myanmar's Delta region remain poor despite producing one of the country's most essential food crops. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with farmers, local leaders, traders, millers, community-based and non-governmental organization practitioners, and agricultural experts, the study argues that smallholder poverty is produced through structurally unequal agricultural value chains rather than individual deficiency. Thematic analysis of fourteen respondent entries shows that rising production costs, chronic debt dependency, weak post-harvest infrastructure, limited bargaining power, gendered invisibility, land fragmentation, and inconsistent policy implementation combine to constrain farmer welfare. Findings indicate that market access does not translate into market power when farmers lack storage, drying capacity, and the ability to delay sale. The study concludes that improving smallholder livelihoods requires coordinated reform across credit, infrastructure, land policy, cooperative development, and institutional accountability rather than credit expansion alone.

Keywords: Myanmar, Business, Poverty, Farming, Rural Development

Smallholder farmers are widely described as the backbone of rural economies and national food security, and in Myanmar's Delta this description carries emotional as well as economic weight; several interviewees referred to farmers as “savior farmers,” people who feed the country. Yet interview narratives reveal a more difficult reality: those most responsible for producing food also absorb the greatest share of financial, environmental, and social risk within the value chain. Many farmers continue to frame agriculture as inherited identity and family duty even as it becomes an unreliable route out of poverty, with household life often cycling through borrowing, planting, harvesting, rapid sale, and renewed borrowing. This cycle is not incidental; it reflects how power and value are distributed unevenly across actors in the chain.

The central research question guiding this study is why smallholder farmers remain poor despite producing essential agricultural commodities. Recent evidence indicates that conflict, transport disruption, high input costs, and constrained credit continue to affect farm household productivity, market access, and food security in Myanmar (World Bank, 2024a,

¹International Executive School (IES), Strasbourg, France

²International Executive School (IES), Strasbourg, France

³International Executive School (IES), Strasbourg, France

*Corresponding Author

Received: August 27, 2026; Revision Received: September 25, 2026; Accepted: September 29, 2026

© 2026, Bahadur, S., Win, T. & Khan, B.S; licensee IJSI. This is an Open Access Research distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any Medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

2024b). When harvest arrives, farmers frequently require immediate cash to service debt and preserve lender relationships, meaning market participation does not equate to market freedom. This article draws on qualitative interview data spanning farmers, local leaders, traders, millers, and institutional actors to examine how power moves through credit, pricing, storage, transport, milling, and policy implementation, and to identify why smallholder welfare has not improved despite sustained agricultural production.

The stakes of this question extend beyond a single crop or region. Rice remains central to household nutrition, rural employment, and export earnings across Myanmar, accounting for a substantial share of national cultivated land and agricultural employment (Central Statistical Organization, 2024), and the Delta has long been described as the country's rice bowl. Understanding why the households producing this rice remain poor therefore speaks to a broader debate about whether agricultural production alone can improve rural welfare, or whether production without a corresponding shift in the distribution of risk and reward leaves the people who sustain it no better off. This question has taken on additional urgency since 2021, as conflict, currency instability, and disrupted logistics have layered new pressures onto a value chain that was already structurally unequal, and recent monitoring continues to flag elevated food insecurity risk linked to these compounding shocks (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2025b).

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. It first reviews literature on bargaining power, livelihood resilience, and gendered institutional access, before translating this literature into the study's specific aims and objectives. It then details the qualitative method used to collect and analyze the interview data, before presenting four themes derived from thematic analysis, each illustrated with excerpts drawn from respondents across the value chain. The discussion interprets these themes against the wider literature and considers their practical implications, and the conclusion summarizes the study's central argument.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bargaining Power and Value Chain Governance

Agricultural value-chain literature examines not only production but governance, coordination, market power, and the distribution of value after production (Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity, 2024a). Bargaining power in this context extends beyond negotiation skill to encompass the resources enabling an actor to decline an unfavorable offer, including capital, storage, transport, and institutional access. Although Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital offers a useful theoretical foundation, more recent evidence more directly explains how the absence of equipment, storage, and working capital weakens smallholder positioning during periods of crisis (Takeshima et al., 2024; World Bank, 2024a). Actors who control drying floors, warehouses, and reliable price information can wait and compare buyers, whereas those without such resources are pushed toward distress sales regardless of any formal freedom to choose a buyer. Studies of Myanmar's rice value chain further show that modernization has proceeded unevenly, widening the gap between capital-holding actors and smallholders, particularly where conflict has disrupted markets (Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity, 2024a, 2024b).

This body of work suggests that interventions aimed only at connecting farmers to buyers are unlikely to alter outcomes if the underlying distribution of storage, transport, and information remains unchanged, since the capacity to wait, rather than the capacity to sell, is what ultimately determines price outcomes at harvest. Taken together, this literature implies that

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

bargaining power should be understood as a relational property distributed across a value chain, rather than as an individual trait or skill that a given farmer either possesses or lacks.

Livelihoods, Resilience, and Rural Poverty

Livelihood and resilience perspectives frame household wellbeing as more than seasonal income; it also concerns the capacity to absorb shocks, retain assets, diversify activity, and access institutions. Rural development literature argues that smallholder poverty cannot be resolved through increased production alone, and instead requires fairer markets and stronger household resilience within broader food systems (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2023; International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2021, 2024). Within this framing, poverty is understood as a gradual narrowing of choice rather than solely a shortage of income, manifesting through outmigration, debt pressure, and asset depletion.

This perspective is particularly relevant to conflict-affected settings such as Myanmar's Delta, where households must simultaneously manage production risk, market volatility, and broader political and economic instability, and where resilience therefore depends on more than any single season's harvest outcome. Livelihoods scholarship also cautions against treating resilience as a fixed household trait; rather, it is something households build or lose gradually, through cumulative decisions about borrowing, asset sale, migration, and diversification made under pressure and often with incomplete information. This dynamic, rather than static, view of resilience is consistent with the way respondents in this study described their circumstances changing, sometimes for the worse, across successive harvest seasons.

Gender and Institutional Access in Smallholder Agriculture

Gender functions as a supporting, rather than central, analytical lens in this study. Existing literature and interview evidence converge on the observation that women's agricultural contributions are systematically under-recognized because land documentation, household headship, and public market engagement are typically organized around men (Kabeer, 1999). Nonetheless, women continue to sustain farming households through homestead production, livestock management, care work, and household financial coordination. Institutional structures, including farmer registries, training invitations, and credit pathways, tend to reproduce this invisibility by recognizing only the male household head.

This paper foregrounds debt, land, market power, and post-harvest infrastructure as primary analytical concerns, while treating gender as one important dimension of smallholder vulnerability that intersects with these structural constraints. Framing gender in this supporting role reflects the balance of the interview data itself, in which gendered invisibility consistently emerged alongside, rather than as a substitute for, material constraints of capital, storage, and institutional access. It is also worth noting that this framing is a methodological choice rather than a claim that gender is analytically secondary in any absolute sense; a study designed around a larger sample of women-headed households, or one using a feminist political-economy lens as its primary framework, might well produce a different weighting of these themes.

Research Aims and Objectives

Building on this literature, the present study addresses a gap in Myanmar-specific evidence regarding how bargaining power, livelihood resilience, and institutional access jointly produce smallholder poverty within a single value chain. The overarching aim is to explain

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

why smallholder farmers in Myanmar's Delta remain poor despite producing an essential commodity.

Three objectives follow from this aim. First, to examine how farmers' access to storage, transport, and market information shapes their bargaining position relative to traders, millers, and other value-chain actors. Second, to investigate how debt dependency, rising production costs, and land fragmentation interact to constrain household livelihood security over time. Third, to assess how policy implementation, corruption, and gendered institutional recognition mediate smallholder access to credit, land, and support services. Addressing these objectives through triangulated stakeholder perspectives allows the study to move beyond production-focused explanations of rural poverty toward an account grounded in the distribution of power and value across the agricultural value chain.

METHODS

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews, selected for its capacity to capture lived experience alongside institutional and market-level explanation across multiple stakeholder positions in a single value chain. The design allowed comparison between household-level accounts and the perspectives of actors positioned differently within the chain, including traders, millers, local leaders, and policy-facing practitioners. This triangulated approach was intended to identify recurring themes across viewpoints rather than to test a predetermined hypothesis, consistent with an interpretivist orientation appropriate to understanding how power and value operate within agricultural markets.

Participants

The study drew on 14 respondent entries, including individual interviews and one women farmers' focus group, purposively sampled to represent distinct positions within the rice value chain in Myanmar's Delta. Respondents comprised smallholder farmers, a women farmers' focus group, a large-scale farmer included for contrast, local leaders responsible for village administration, traders, a miller/trader, community-based organization actors, non-governmental organization practitioners, and agricultural experts. This composition was designed to allow comparison between household-level experience, market-based explanation, and institutional diagnosis. Because the dataset combines individual and group-based responses, entries are referred to as respondent entries throughout.

Across the 14 entries, a total of 18 individuals participated, including five women who took part in the focus group. To protect participant identity, all respondents were assigned pseudonyms prior to analysis, and no real names appear in the dataset, this article, or any associated materials; findings are reported by stakeholder category rather than by individual pseudonym to further safeguard confidentiality. Sample demographic characteristics, including age, gender, education level, and marital status, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Demographic Characteristics (N = 18)

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Age	25–34 years	3 (16.7)
	35–44 years	6 (33.3)
	45–54 years	5 (27.8)
	55 years and above	4 (22.2)

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Gender	Male	11 (61.1)
	Female	7 (38.9)
Education Level	No formal schooling	2 (11.1)
	Primary	7 (38.9)
	Secondary	6 (33.3)
	Tertiary	3 (16.7)
Marital Status	Married	14 (77.8)
	Single	2 (11.1)
	Widowed	2 (11.1)

Note. Percentages are rounded and calculated out of the total sample (N = 18). Demographic categories are reported in aggregate to protect participant identity.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews organized around research questions concerning production costs, debt, market access, storage, land, gender, and policy implementation. All interviews were conducted jointly by the first and second author, who also facilitated the women farmers' focus group to capture collective perspectives on gendered agricultural labor.

As the primary instruments of data collection in this qualitative design, the first and second author remained attentive throughout to their own position relative to respondents; both authors are affiliated with an international academic institution rather than a local government or lending body, which appeared to support candor on sensitive topics such as debt and corruption, though it may also have shaped which experiences respondents chose to share with outside researchers. Interview material was subsequently cleaned and organized by research section, respondent stakeholder category, and response content to support systematic thematic comparison across the dataset.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were read by section, and recurring meanings were grouped into themes interpreted against the study's central research question. Analysis proceeded iteratively across stakeholder groups to identify convergence and divergence in how different actors explained smallholder poverty. The analysis retained the original meaning of respondent input while using academic language to render findings coherent and readable, and is best understood as a humanized synthesis of interview data rather than a verbatim record of the primary material.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Degrees Ethics Committee at the International Executive School, Strasbourg, France. Because the dataset contains sensitive statements concerning institutions, corruption, conflict, and debt, individual identification was minimized throughout; participants are described by stakeholder category rather than by name, and all respondents were assigned pseudonyms to further protect their identity, consistent with the confidentiality assurances given at the time of interview.

Direct quotations are used sparingly and only where necessary to preserve participant voice, with light editing for readability that retains the original meaning. Informed consent procedures and confidentiality safeguards were applied consistent with the ethics committee's

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

requirements for research involving vulnerable populations in a conflict-affected setting. Table 2 provides an overview of the respondent groups included in the sample, their primary perspective, and the key issues each captured during analysis.

Table 2: Respondent Groups and Analytical Focus

Respondent Group	Perspective	Key Issues Captured
Smallholder farmers and women's focus group	Lived household and farm experience	Debt, input costs, land loss, gendered labor, weak bargaining power
Local leaders	Village administration	Documentation, headship, land records, loan access
Traders, millers, exporters	Market and value-chain operations	Pricing, storage, transport, drying, contract farming
CBO/NGO actors and experts	Institutional and policy view	Gender exclusion, weak extension, corruption, cooperative needs

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the 14 respondent entries produced four major themes that together explain why smallholder farmers in Myanmar's Delta remain poor despite sustained rice production. The first theme concerns the erosion of farming as a viable livelihood under rising costs and debt dependency. The second concerns the gap between market access and market power at the point of sale. The third concerns the dependence of smallholders on intermediaries who control post-harvest infrastructure and, with it, the capacity to capture value. The fourth concerns how gender, information access, and institutional policy gaps compound these constraints.

Although each theme is presented separately below, the interview data show that they operate together rather than independently: a farmer without storage (Theme 2) is also more exposed to debt-driven distress sale (Theme 1), and both are shaped by whose labor and needs are institutionally recognized (Theme 4). Table 3 provides an overview of the four themes and their key issues before each is discussed in turn, with supporting excerpts, below (see Table 3).

Table 3: Overview of Themes Identified in the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Key Issues Captured
1. Livelihood insecurity: farming identity, the cost-price squeeze, and debt dependency	Farming as inherited duty despite poor returns; rising input costs outpacing paddy prices; debt cycles culminating in land loss
2. Market access without market power	Seasonal oversupply, lack of storage and drying capacity, opaque pricing and moisture measurement, contract farming dependency
3. Intermediary dependence and post-harvest infrastructure as power	Traders and millers provide needed services but capture disproportionate value; storage and drying capacity determine who can wait for a better price
4. Gender, information access, and institutional/policy gaps	Women's unrecognized labor; weak training and digital/financial literacy; corruption and uneven policy implementation; land fragmentation and barriers to cooperative formation

Theme 1: Livelihood Insecurity: Farming Identity, the Cost-Price Squeeze, and Debt Dependency

Across respondent groups, farming was consistently described as a source of identity and inherited duty rather than merely an income-generating activity. Several smallholder farmers explained that they had cultivated land for decades, sometimes since childhood, and continued farming despite persistently poor returns. This finding complicates any explanation of poverty rooted in a lack of farmer effort or commitment. Instead, respondents described an environment that changed faster than their capacity to adapt, particularly after 2020, when COVID-19, political instability, labor shortages, fuel and fertilizer price increases, market disruption, and conscription requirements combined to erode household resilience. One smallholder farmer captured this exhaustion directly:

"This may be our last attempt to survive through farming. We are tired of it, with debt accumulating every month and every year."

The phrase "last attempt" is telling. It frames farming not as a stable vocation but as a wager this respondent felt was nearing its end, continued because leaving was not yet a viable alternative rather than because farming itself had become newly rewarding. This pattern is consistent with recent Myanmar monitoring linking conflict, logistics disruption, and credit constraints to declining household resilience (World Bank, 2024a, 2024b).

Notably, income data revealed a clear contrast between smallholders and larger commercial actors. A large-scale farmer included in the sample described a comparatively manageable business model built on machinery, storage, and diversified assets such as fish ponds and livestock, in direct contrast to the smallholder farmers and women's focus group participants, who described remaining fully exposed to cost and price volatility because they depended on raw paddy sales alone. Farming, in the accounts of smallholder respondents, functions less as an expanding livelihood and more as a fragile activity sustained through sacrifice.

A near-universal theme across respondent groups was the widening gap between production costs and paddy prices. Smallholder farmers cited fuel, fertilizer, seed, machinery, and labor as costs that had risen without a corresponding increase in paddy prices. National survey data confirm that mechanization costs alone surged by 42 percent during the 2023 monsoon season (Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity, 2024b), though the same survey also recorded a substantial rise in farm-gate paddy prices and an overall increase in real profitability that year; respondents' emphasis on a persistent squeeze may therefore reflect experiences concentrated in more conflict-affected regions, a longer time horizon than a single monsoon season, or household-level cost burdens not fully captured in national averages, rather than a straightforward contradiction of aggregate trends. One farmer summarized the imbalance succinctly:

"All prices are up except paddy price, which is the farm product."

The comment reduces the cost-price squeeze to its simplest form: every input this farmer buys has risen with general inflation, while the one product this farmer sells has been left behind by that same inflation. Several other respondents echoed this framing in less compact language, suggesting it reflects a shared perception rather than one farmer's isolated complaint.

This squeeze was described as structurally binding rather than temporary; reducing input use risked crop failure, while maintaining input levels required further borrowing. Several

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

smallholder farmers noted that traditional low-cost farming systems based on saved seed and natural fertilizer cycles had weakened, deepening dependence on purchased inputs. Household poverty was compounded because farm costs rose alongside food, medical, transport, and education expenses; the women farmers' focus group in particular explained that farm income and household survival costs could not be separated, since a loan taken for fertilizer was frequently the same loan drawn on for school fees, medicine, or daily food. This indicates that farm profitability cannot be understood in isolation from the wider household economy.

Debt emerged as a further central mechanism sustaining smallholder poverty. Nearly all respondent groups, including farmers, local leaders, and traders, referenced formal loans, informal borrowing, or input advances tied to post-harvest repayment. Local leaders explained that formal government loans were often insufficient, delayed, or constrained by land documentation requirements, pushing farmers toward borrowing from traders, millers, input suppliers, and informal lenders at markedly higher interest rates. Respondents were clear that borrowing itself was not inherently harmful; the problem lay in credit conditions that curtailed future choice. One smallholder farmer described this tension vividly:

"Debt is like you cannot survive without it and you cannot sleep well with it."

This framing casts debt not as a discrete transaction to be resolved but as a chronic condition to be endured, simultaneously indispensable and corrosive. That dual framing recurred across several farmer accounts of the annual borrowing cycle, and it helps explain why farmers continued to borrow even while describing the practice in such negative terms.

The interview data suggest that debt directly weakened bargaining power, as farmers facing imminent repayment felt unable to decline unfavorable prices, with selling decisions effectively predetermined before harvest. The most severe consequence described by respondents was land loss: several smallholder farmers and local leaders recounted partial or complete land sale as a final repayment mechanism, after which former owners became tenants, wage laborers, or migrants. Local leaders and CBO/NGO practitioners described this pattern as producing what some interviewees called a "land-selling generation," a phrase that captures how, in respondents' own understanding, smallholder poverty extends beyond income shortfall into a progressive depletion of assets that further weakens households' future bargaining position.

Theme 2: Market Access Without Market Power

Respondents across stakeholder groups distinguished, often unprompted, between having access to markets and possessing power within them. Traders and millers themselves acknowledged that brokers and buyers routinely engaged farmers directly during harvest season, yet smallholder farmers explained that this contact rarely translated into negotiating leverage. Recent Myanmar evidence similarly shows that value-chain modernization and rice exports can continue even as insecurity and uneven service access limit participation among poorer farmers (Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity, 2024a; World Bank, 2024a). The seasonal structure of the market appeared to compound this imbalance: several smallholder farmers described selling simultaneously with neighbors at peak harvest, while drying and storage capacity remained limited and wet paddy deteriorated quickly without adequate handling facilities. One smallholder farmer summarized the resulting asymmetry starkly: *"Bargaining power is zero to smallholders except those who have storage facilities and manpower to dry and store."*

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

The word “zero” is doing real work in this statement. This respondent did not describe bargaining power as merely diminished but as effectively absent for anyone without physical storage capacity, a stark framing that aligns closely with the trader and miller accounts discussed in Theme 3 below. Several smallholder farmers also raised concerns about the transparency of moisture measurement and weighing practices, explaining that they had difficulty verifying or challenging the basis of pricing set by mills or informal price-setting arrangements. A miller/trader respondent acknowledged that township mills or established local pricing benchmarks effectively set an indicative price that other buyers then followed, leaving farmers with little practical means of disputing deductions made at the point of sale.

Traders further described contract farming and input-advance arrangements as offering useful finance where government credit was insufficient, while acknowledging that such arrangements could bind farmers to a single buyer under unclear repayment or market-price terms, a tension consistent with broader evidence that the welfare effects of contract farming for smallholders are highly context-dependent (Bellemare & Bloem, 2018); respondents from both the trader and smallholder groups suggested that the effect of these arrangements on farmer welfare depends heavily on the transparency of terms and the farmer's capacity to negotiate them.

Theme 3: Intermediary Dependence and Post-Harvest Infrastructure as Power

Traders and millers resisted a simplistic framing of their role as uniformly exploitative, and smallholder farmers themselves largely agreed. Traders described providing services, including transport, drying, storage, credit, and market linkage, that farmers genuinely needed in the absence of strong public systems or cooperatives; one miller/trader respondent described substantial personal investment in mills, boats, and warehouses alongside exposure to policy and currency risk. The critical distinction identified across respondent groups was not the presence of intermediaries but the unevenness of available options: traders and millers explained that they could diversify across services, store grain, and process paddy into rice, whereas smallholder farmers explained that they typically sold raw paddy under time pressure with no comparable alternative.

Post-harvest infrastructure emerged as a decisive turning point in the data. The large-scale farmer in the sample described drying and storing paddy until prices improved, choosing when and to whom to sell; smallholder farmers and the women's focus group, describing the same harvest window, reported selling directly from the field because they had no safe holding capacity at all. As one CBO/NGO practitioner put it in describing this asymmetry, a farmer with a drying floor negotiates, while a farmer without one simply accepts whatever is offered.

Traders were candid that they benefited from this gap: several noted that grain purchased wet and cheap at harvest could be dried, stored, and resold weeks later at a substantially better price, with the difference accruing to whoever held the grain during the interval rather than to whoever grew it. This contrast, drawn directly from respondents on opposite sides of the same transaction, supports interpreting post-harvest infrastructure itself as a form of power within the value chain, and helps explain why farmers with otherwise similar landholdings and family size described such different economic outcomes.

Theme 4: Gender, Information Access, and Institutional/Policy Gaps

Gender emerged as a secondary but consistent theme. Local leaders and CBO/NGO practitioners explained that men were typically recognized as farmers because they held land documents and represented households in official and market interactions, while the women farmers' focus group described sustaining household economies through homestead production, livestock, care work, and financial management that remained largely absent from official records and training invitations. Related to this, several smallholder farmers and focus group participants reported having never received agricultural training, instead relying on informal networks, family, or online sources; agricultural experts likewise reported that digital tools such as price applications and social media groups were known to farmers but not consistently trusted or well understood, emphasizing a need for digital and financial literacy rather than platforms alone.

Institutional and policy factors compounded these constraints. CBO/NGO actors and experts recognized the value of government loans and price-support mechanisms in principle but described them as insufficient, delayed, or weakened by corruption and uneven administrative access, consistent with Myanmar-wide evidence of continuing credit and market-access constraints (World Bank, 2024a). Several local leaders and experts suggested that fixed-price policies, if not regularly reviewed against real production costs, could inadvertently narrow farmer margins and increase distress sales. Smallholder farmers described land-use restrictions as similarly counterproductive, explaining that fear of fines or administrative pressure discouraged diversification into fish ponds, poultry, or vegetables, even though they viewed such diversification as essential to reducing dependence on paddy alone.

Inheritance-based land fragmentation was identified as a further structural driver of poverty. One trader illustrated the mechanism concretely, explaining that twenty acres divided equally among three children leaves each heir with only six or seven acres, a scale at which farming may no longer cover production costs, debt repayment, and household expenses. The same trader noted that where some heirs have already moved into factory work, migration, or other livelihoods, they may lease or sell their share, typically to wealthier farmers, traders, or millers able to offer immediate cash. Local leaders agreed that inheritance practices which appear equitable within the family can unintentionally produce land fragmentation and, over time, land concentration among better-capitalized buyers.

Local leaders further described leasing as both a coping strategy and a warning sign of withdrawal from active farming, eroding owners' machinery access, market relationships, and the next generation's attachment to the land, while exposing tenants to risk on land they do not own. Corruption was raised frequently and with evident frustration, particularly by CBO/NGO actors, who described preferential treatment for well-connected or large-scale actors in the allocation of documents, land conversion approvals, input distribution, and project access; their concern was less that corruption exists than that uneven implementation erodes trust, since a policy can appear fair on paper while remaining inaccessible to smallholders lacking networks or resources to navigate it.

Finally, many smallholder farmers expressed interest in farmer cooperatives as a route to stronger bargaining power, provided such cooperatives offered concrete economic functions, including drying, storage, transport coordination, collective input purchase, and price negotiation, rather than existing only as a nominal meeting group.

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

Local leaders and experts tempered this interest by pointing to barriers of trust, short-term debt pressure, competition among farmers during harvest, and past experiences of cooperative capture by local leaders, traders, or administrators, a risk documented elsewhere in evaluations of farmer-organization interventions (Gelo et al., 2019), suggesting that cooperative development requires sustained governance and protection alongside tangible economic function.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that smallholder poverty in Myanmar's Delta is produced through a systemic pattern of unequal risk exposure rather than through individual farmer behavior. Farmers absorb the majority of production, climatic, and market risk, yet possess the weakest tools to manage it, a pattern consistent with evidence that agrifood value-chain disruption in Myanmar disproportionately affects resource-poor farmers relative to traders, millers, and other capitalized actors (Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity, 2024a; Takeshima et al., 2024). While traders and exporters also face genuine risk from policy change and currency instability, their capacity to diversify, store, and pass costs forward distinguishes their position fundamentally from that of smallholders, who cannot pass paddy-price risk onward.

These findings extend existing value-chain literature by suggesting that market access and market power are analytically distinct outcomes that should not be conflated in policy design. Farmers in this study were not excluded from markets in any formal sense; buyers, traders, and price information were consistently available, at least as respondents described it.

What appeared to differentiate smallholder outcomes was the capacity to delay sale, a capacity dependent on storage, drying infrastructure, and working capital rather than market presence itself. This interpretation supports and extends food-systems literature arguing that rural prosperity depends on fair participation and value addition rather than production volume or market linkage alone (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2021). Policy interventions premised on improving market access without addressing post-harvest infrastructure therefore seem unlikely, on this reading of the data, to shift the underlying distribution of value.

The findings further suggest that debt in this setting should be understood as a relational, rather than purely financial, mechanism, consistent with classic accounts of interlinked credit and market transactions in agrarian settings (Bell, 1988). Because farmers borrow from actors they continue to depend on across seasons, including traders, larger farmers, and neighbors, loan repayment is entangled with reputational and future-access considerations, which explains farmers' apparently rapid or unfavorable sale decisions. This reframes such decisions as rational responses to a narrow choice set rather than as evidence of poor financial judgment, and suggests that credit policy addressing only cash-flow timing will fail to address the relational pressures shaping sale behavior.

Gender findings reinforce, rather than replace, this structural account. Women's labor appeared integral to household survival during periods of weak paddy income, yet remained largely invisible within formal recognition systems organized around male household headship. This is consistent with feminist economic literature on the gap between women's substantive economic contribution and their formal recognition within resource and decision-making systems (Kabeer, 1999). Because credit, training, and land documentation processes

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

are typically organized around a recognized household head, this invisibility has direct material consequences for whose labor is compensated, trained, and protected, reinforcing rather than existing alongside the study's central structural argument.

The findings also carry intergenerational implications not fully captured by existing value-chain frameworks. Respondents' accounts of children leaving farming for urban or overseas work suggest that current value distribution patterns may accelerate structural land concentration over time, as fragmented, uneconomical plots created through inheritance are leased or sold to better-capitalized buyers. This dynamic connects debt-driven land loss with a second, slower pathway toward land concentration rooted in inheritance practices, indicating that land reform and cooperative development should be considered jointly rather than as separate policy tracks.

Triangulation across stakeholder groups strengthens confidence in these findings. Farmers, traders, local leaders, and institutional actors each emphasized different mechanisms, including debt and lack of storage, capital and timing, documentation and land-use restriction, and weak policy implementation and cooperative capacity, respectively, yet these accounts converged on a single explanation: smallholders bear production risk while lacking the capital, infrastructure, and collective organization required to capture value after harvest. This convergence across structurally different vantage points suggests the finding is not an artifact of any single respondent group's perspective.

A further implication concerns institutional trust. Respondents' accounts of corruption and uneven policy implementation suggest that the credibility of reform depends as much on how support is delivered as on what is offered. A well-designed credit or price-support policy is unlikely to shift smallholder outcomes if access continues to depend on administrative networks or informal payments, since this simply relocates bargaining disadvantage from the market to the bureaucracy. This suggests that infrastructure- and credit-focused reforms discussed elsewhere in the literature should be paired with transparent eligibility criteria and independent monitoring if they are to reach the smallholders most exposed to risk, rather than being captured by already better-connected farmers or intermediaries.

These patterns are not unique to Myanmar. Comparable value-chain studies in other smallholder rice- and grain-producing regions have similarly found that market liberalization and increased buyer contact do not automatically improve farmgate prices where storage, transport, and processing capacity remain concentrated among a small number of capitalized intermediaries (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2021). The Myanmar Delta findings therefore contribute a conflict-affected case to this broader literature, showing that political instability and logistics disruption can intensify, rather than create, an underlying structural imbalance that already existed before 2021.

This suggests that post-conflict or crisis-recovery programming aimed at smallholders should not assume that restoring market access alone will restore farmer welfare. Where the pre-crisis value chain already concentrated storage and bargaining power among a narrow set of actors, recovery programming risks reproducing the same distribution of value unless post-harvest infrastructure and cooperative capacity are addressed directly alongside market restoration.

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

Read together, the four themes point toward a coherent, rather than piecemeal, reform agenda. Addressing livelihood insecurity and debt dependency (Theme 1) without also addressing the storage and drying deficits underlying market powerlessness (Theme 2) would leave farmers financially supported but still forced into distress sales at harvest. Similarly, strengthening farmer cooperatives (Theme 4) without resolving the post-harvest infrastructure gap that currently favors intermediaries (Theme 3) risks creating cooperatives with governance but no economic function, a combination respondents themselves associated with past disappointment. This suggests that credit reform, post-harvest infrastructure investment, cooperative development, and institutional transparency are complementary rather than substitutable interventions, and that sequencing matters: infrastructure and governance reforms that are not paired with accessible, transparent credit are unlikely to shift smallholder bargaining power on their own.

More broadly, these findings suggest a modest refinement to how bargaining power is theorized in agricultural value-chain research. Existing frameworks tend to treat bargaining power as a function of an actor's resources at a given point in time, such as whether a farmer owns a dryer or a warehouse.

The interview data suggest that bargaining power in this setting is better understood as accumulated over, and vulnerable to erosion across, multiple harvest cycles: a single bad season can push a resourceful household into debt, and debt, in turn, forecloses the very choices, such as delaying a sale or investing in storage, that would have protected bargaining power in the following season. This suggests bargaining power is path-dependent in a way that cross-sectional value-chain analyses may understate, and that longitudinal attention to how households move into or out of debt may be as important as measuring their assets at any single moment.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has several limitations. The sample of 14 respondent entries, while purposively diverse, is small and geographically concentrated within Myanmar's Delta, limiting generalizability to other regions or crops. Reliance on retrospective self-report also means findings reflect participants' interpretations of events rather than independently verified transactions, prices, or loan terms. The qualitative design, while well suited to capturing mechanism and meaning, cannot quantify the relative weight of debt, infrastructure, and policy factors in explaining household-level poverty outcomes. Additionally, the sensitivity of topics such as corruption and informal lending may have led some respondents to underreport certain practices despite confidentiality assurances and the use of pseudonyms.

Future research should combine qualitative and quantitative methods to estimate the relative contribution of storage access, debt burden, and land fragmentation to household income outcomes across a larger and more geographically diverse sample. Longitudinal research tracking farming households across multiple seasons would help clarify whether debt-driven and inheritance-driven pathways to land loss operate independently or interact over time.

Further research is also needed on the design and governance conditions under which farmer cooperatives successfully avoid capture by local elites, given that respondents in this study viewed cooperative potential with considerable ambivalence. Finally, comparative research examining how similar dynamics operate in other Myanmar crops or in comparable smallholder settings within the region would help clarify whether the mechanisms identified

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

here are specific to Delta rice production or reflect broader patterns in smallholder value chains.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that smallholder farmers in Myanmar's Delta remain poor not due to a lack of effort or commitment to farming, but because they occupy the weakest position within a structurally unequal agricultural value chain. They absorb the greatest share of production and market risk while lacking the storage, capital, and collective organization needed to convert market access into genuine bargaining power. Debt, land fragmentation, weak post-harvest infrastructure, and uneven policy implementation combine to narrow household choices over time, with women's substantial contribution to household survival remaining largely unrecognized within formal systems. Addressing smallholder poverty therefore requires coordinated reform across credit design, post-harvest infrastructure, land-use policy, cooperative development, and institutional accountability, rather than any single intervention. Without such reform, continued land loss and generational withdrawal from farming risk eroding not only household livelihoods but the rural foundations of Myanmar's food security.

REFERENCES

- Bell, C. (1988). Credit markets and interlinked transactions. In H. Chenery & T. N. Srinivasan (Eds.), *Handbook of development economics* (Vol. 1, pp. 763–830). Elsevier.
- Bellemare, M. F., & Bloem, J. R. (2018). Does contract farming improve welfare? A review. *World Development*, 112, 259–271. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.08.018>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Central Statistical Organization. (2024). Myanmar agricultural statistics 2014–2015 to 2022–2023. Ministry of Planning and Finance, Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. [https://www.csostat.gov.mm/FileUpload/cso/FileDownload/Myanmar%20Agricultural%20Statistics%20\(2014-2015%20to%202022-2023\).pdf](https://www.csostat.gov.mm/FileUpload/cso/FileDownload/Myanmar%20Agricultural%20Statistics%20(2014-2015%20to%202022-2023).pdf)
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2023). The state of food and agriculture 2023: Revealing the true cost of food to transform agrifood systems. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7724en>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2025b). GIEWS country brief: Myanmar, September 2025. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/giews-country-brief-myanmar-05-september-2025>
- Gelo, D., Muchapondwa, E., Shimeles, A., & Dikgang, J. (2019). Welfare effect and elite capture in agricultural cooperatives intervention: Evidence from Ethiopian villages (IZA Discussion Paper No. 12495). Institute of Labor Economics. <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/12495/welfare-effect-and-elite-capture-in-agricultural-cooperatives-intervention-evidence-from-ethiopian-villages>
- International Fund for Agricultural Development. (2021). Rural development report 2021: Transforming food systems for rural prosperity. International Fund for Agricultural Development. <https://www.ifad.org/documents/48415603/49775134/rdr2021.pdf>
- International Fund for Agricultural Development. (2024). IFAD annual report 2024. International Fund for Agricultural Development. <https://www.ifad.org/en/annual-report-2024/>

Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta

- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
- Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity. (2024a). Conflict, inclusivity, and transformation of the rice value chain in Myanmar (Myanmar SSP Working Paper No. 55). International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/141582>
- Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity. (2024b). Rice productivity and profitability in Myanmar: Assessment of the 2023 monsoon (Myanmar SSP Working Paper No. 56). International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/141875>
- Takeshima, H., Aung, Z. W., Masias, I., & Minten, B. (2024). Resource-poor rice farmers in Myanmar suffer double impact from political conflict. *Asia and the Pacific Food Security Portal*. <https://asia.foodsecurityportal.org/node/3310>
- World Bank. (2024a). Myanmar: Agricultural resilience amid deepening food insecurity. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/42108>
- World Bank. (2024b). Myanmar economic monitor, June 2024: Livelihoods under threat. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/41741>

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Bahadur, S., Win, T. & Khan, B.S. (2026). Trapped in the Value Chain: A Qualitative Study of Power, Market Access, and Smallholder Poverty in Myanmar's Delta. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(3), 286-300. DIP: 18.02.025/20261103, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1103025