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An everyday political economy of food insecurity in Myanmar's Central Dry Zone

Mark Vicol¹ · Aye Sandar Phyo² · Bill Pritchard²

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Abstract

Food insecurity is often highly differentiated within village contexts of the Global South. This paper argues that an everyday political economy approach provides a useful framework to account for such differentiation. We apply this approach in a rural village in Myanmar's Central Dry Zone, utilizing a mixed-methods approach that incorporates (1) food security and dietary diversity indexes, (2) household interviews and (3) qualitative wealth rankings. Our analysis shows that patterns of food insecurity and diet emerge out of the conjuncture of everyday livelihood activities and political-economic relations between individuals and between social groups. Those who control the land of the village continue to enjoy better food security and diet quality above landless or smaller landowning households. However, the centrality of land ownership as an indicator of household food and nutrition security status is becoming blurred because of the increasing availability of non-farm livelihood activities. Differentiated opportunities for households to grasp non-farm livelihoods can sometimes challenge but more often reproduce unequal patterns of wealth and hunger. The everyday political economy approach brings into focus the lived experiences behind these processes of change, making visible the complexities of village life that are not able to be revealed in analyses dependent on socio-economic variables alone.

Keywords Everyday political economy · Food insecurity · Differentiation · Myanmar · Agriculture

1 Introduction

Across the Global South, agrarian communities traditionally dependent on subsistence or semi-subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods and food security are undergoing change. Farming is becoming more tightly integrated with commercial markets. Non-agricultural activities, such as manufacturing and services, are providing enhanced opportunities for individuals to secure livelihoods outside of agriculture (Rigg et al., 2016). These processes catalyse changes to the capacity of households to achieve positive food security and nutrition outcomes. Yet, the expression of these changes can differ sharply between households and villages, and among individuals. The purpose of this paper is to introduce an approach we label the *everyday political economy of food*

insecurity as an analytical framework to capture and account for such differentiation.

This paper is inspired by an imperative to address analytical gaps in contemporary food security research. At the present time, this literature is dominated by quantitative analyses of the socio-economic drivers of food insecurity. The literature typically uses statistical and econometric methods to infer relationships between food security and dietary quality on the one hand, and discrete socio-economic variables such as land ownership and cropping diversity on the other (e.g. Silvestri et al., 2015; Castañeda-Navarrete, 2021). Such research approaches can tell us a great deal about broad connections between socio-economic difference and food insecurity, but in their quest for generalizability, can ignore context and agency. This oversight matters in the context of increasingly diverse livelihood opportunities of village populations. There is a need for approaches that analyse the ways in which individuals and households navigate their livelihoods and how this shapes their experiences of food security and the quality of their diets.

This paper pursues this objective through the 'everyday' approach in contemporary qualitative research. We are not

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the first researchers to apply this approach to food insecurity. Previous ‘everyday’ research has documented how different contextual processes such as policy, culture, socio-economic conditions etc. shape daily practices and coping strategies around food, diet and food insecurity, and vice versa (Graham et al., 2018; Hadley et al., 2012; Ham, 2020; Hammelman, 2018; Ivancic, 2021; Ngcoya & Kumarakulasingam, 2017; Nichols, 2016; Tan et al., 2017). These studies typically use narrative analyses and other ethnographic techniques to collect rich information about an individual’s lifeworld as it relates to food insecurity. However, a weakness of this existing literature is its lack of engagement with the *politics* of the everyday. Existing studies tend to focus either on the individual or homogenize a target group (e.g. ‘women’, ‘small farmers’ etc.). In other words these studies are typically not concerned with explaining difference *within* study populations. Our discrete contribution here is to link the lived experiences of food insecurity with the *politics* of the everyday. We seek to reveal how food insecurity manifests in the everyday lives of differently positioned people and households, and in turn, how patterns of food insecurity sustain or challenge village-scale patterns of social differentiation.

We apply this approach to an in-depth analysis of food insecurity in a rural village in Myanmar’s Central Dry Zone (CDZ). The empirical research that underpins this analysis draws on the results from mixed methods research (quantitative household surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews) undertaken as part of a wider project from 2016–18 (Pritchard et al., 2018) and a PhD undertaken by one of the authors from 2018–23 (Phyo, 2023). The interest of these wider research projects was to document and analyse drivers of food insecurity in the rapidly changing agrarian landscape of Myanmar during this period. Field research took place prior to the 2021 Myanmar coup, and therefore reflects the economic, social, and political contexts when the country was governed by the National League for Democracy (NLD).¹ During this period rural Myanmar was experiencing rapid change due to economic liberalisation and structural

transformations in the national economy. Rural village populations in the CDZ faced a myriad of challenges and new opportunities, including degrading ecological conditions affecting farming, high rates of landlessness and struggles over access to land, farm labour shortages, new markets for export agriculture, improving transport infrastructure, increased mobility, and a rapidly expanding non-farm economy. These dynamics intersected in complex ways with the capacities and strategies of households to feed themselves.

This paper builds on previous outputs from the project (Htet et al., 2019; Pritchard et al., 2019a, b; Rammohan et al., 2018, 2019; Vicol & Pritchard, 2021; Vicol et al., 2018) by focusing on the following two research questions:

1. How are dietary patterns and the experience of food insecurity differentiated across social groups?
2. How are these differentiated patterns of diet and food insecurity reproduced or challenged in everyday life?

We address these questions as follows. We first outline the conceptual ideas behind an everyday political economy approach. Then, we describe the food insecurity-livelihoods context of rural Myanmar during the NLD period, as well as the methodology employed in the case study. The paper then turns to the empirical findings from the case study village. Key insights from our conceptual and methodological approach are then discussed in the concluding section.

2 Towards an everyday political economy of food insecurity

The everyday political economy (EPE) approach has emerged over the last two decades as a distinct research programme within the discipline of international political economy. It reacted to an orthodoxy that emphasised regulatory institutions and elite actors at the expense of everyday actors. In their influential contribution, Hobson and Seabrooke argued that this approach could reveal the “manifold ways in which everyday actions can transform the world economy” (2007, p. 2). In other words, the EPE approach did not simply reorient the researcher’s gaze to “the real lives of everyday people” (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007, p. 2), but offered a framework to explain wider processes in terms of the interplay with individuals’ actions and agency.

For instance, Elias and Rethel (2016, p. 4), focusing on Southeast Asia, use an EPE approach to consider “the ways in which economic transformations ‘touch down’ within the lives of ordinary people” and how economic transformation at various scales is sustained and/or challenged through everyday practices. Their application takes inspiration from anthropologists who analyse agrarian politics and resistance through the prism of the everyday agency and actions

¹ On 1 February 2021 the Myanmar military (*Tatmadaw*) deposed the democratically elected National League for Democracy government of Myanmar in a coup d’état before returning power to a military junta. At the time of writing, the military junta has thrust Myanmar back into a period of violence, arbitrary arrest, oppression, uncertainty and de facto civil war. Many villages in the Central Dry Zone have been arbitrarily burned by the military, and residents forced to flee, including the villages in this study. Similarly, many Myanmar researchers, academics and activists have been arrested or forced to flee the country. It is likely that the dynamics analyzed in this paper have shifted dramatically and unevenly, however further research remains impossible at present. The authors are distressed that the people interviewed for this paper are now the bearers of state-sanctioned violence and express our solidarity with those wishing to return democracy to Myanmar.

of people (Kerkvliet, 1990, 2009; J. C. Scott, 1977, 1985). Unlike those contributions, however, EPE does not privilege agency over structure or institutions, nor reify the agency of weak actors. In the words of Rigg, (2016, p. 29), the approach “permits us to connect individual capabilities and volitions, national policies and socio-economic processes, and societal structures”. The everyday is therefore not just a site of individual struggle or resistance, but also where transformation (economic, social, ecological etc.) “plays out in variegated ways” (Elias & Rethel, 2016, p. 4). This brings into focus “new layers of meaning” (Rigg, 2007; Rigg et al., 2014) that can challenge assumptions drawn from summary approaches and aggregate statistics. This includes the phenomenon of food insecurity, where the categories of ‘food secure’ and ‘food insecure’ tend to toward reification at the expense of understanding individual experience *and* difference.

The EPE perspective is not a new theory of politics of the everyday, but rather a pluralistic and inclusive perspective “for generating interdisciplinary conversations across a range of theoretical traditions” (Elias & Rethel, 2016: 4). In this spirit, we develop an EPE perspective on food insecurity that is inspired by the recent efforts of Natarajan et al. (2022) and Scoones (2015) to combine agrarian political economy and livelihoods analysis by ‘re-politicizing’ the livelihoods framework. Natarajan et al. do this by departing from the intrinsic ‘boundedness’ that has defined village-based livelihood analyses. For example, their analysis of rural Thailand highlights how livelihoods at a village scale cannot be disentangled from the migration and remittance flows of villagers across space. They argue: “The onset of and deepening of neoliberal globalisation has integrated rural life more tightly with global forces and has complicated analyses of rural livelihoods as bounded processes” (Natarajan et al., 2022, p. 13). Their framework therefore centrally relocates agrarian class considerations within livelihood analysis. Scoones (2015) argues that the core analytical questions of agrarian political economy can also be read as questions about livelihoods. In the words of Bernstein (2010, p. 22), this means asking questions about who owns what? (the social relations of property and ownership, including of livelihood assets and resources, in particular, land); who does what? (the social division of labour, including who performs what livelihood activities of social production and production); who gets what? (the social division of the product of labour, including but not only income); what do they do with it? (how the social relations of production and reproduction determine the distribution and use of the product of labour, including how livelihood patterns are reproduced over time); and how do social classes and groups in society interact with each other? (the social relations, institutions and forms of domination in society, between individuals and between and within households). All these questions impinge directly on the dynamics of food insecurity and hunger. We develop our

EPE approach around these five questions to understand how patterns of social differentiation shape everyday livelihood practices and experiences around food insecurity and diet in Myanmar’s CDZ, and vice versa.

3 Livelihood transformations and food insecurity in rural Myanmar during the NLD period

In the years after the 2010 elections to the military coup in 2021, rural Myanmar underwent sustained socio-economic change and transformation. This followed over 50 years of military rule, political isolation, and economic stagnation. These changes have been extensively documented (Belton & Filipski, 2019; Belton et al., 2021; Pritchard et al., 2019a, b; Vicol & Pritchard, 2021; Wehmeyer et al., 2022). Rural Myanmar entered the democratic era with high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition (FAO, 2011; Haggblade et al., 2014; Rammohan & Pritchard, 2014), making food security and nutrition policy a key focus for the NLD Government and international development agencies. Household surveys since 2010 leading up to the 2021 coup documented some reductions in food insecurity and malnutrition (LIFT, 2013; Rammohan et al., 2018), although the scale of this problem remained dire and placed a drag on the country’s human development. There is little doubt that food and nutrition security conditions have only worsened since the coup (UNDP, 2023).

The patterns of advantage and disadvantage ingrained during the period of military rule, including food insecurity, continued into the NLD period. Using data from the nationally representative Myanmar Demographic and Health Survey (MDHS) (2015–2016), Das Gupta et al. (2020) found that in women of reproductive age, underweight was concentrated in the poorest wealth quintile, while overweight was concentrated among the higher wealth quintiles. Harvey et al. (2018), utilizing the same MDHS data as Das Gupta et al., found that the likelihood of meeting a minimum dietary diversity threshold increased for children living in households in the upper wealth quintile. Scott et al. (2023), investigating consumption patterns of animal source foods (ASF), found a positive correlation between income-linked wealth status and quantity of ASF consumed, but also higher levels of ASF-derived fat and sodium consumption among better-off households. Using a randomized controlled trial methodology, Maffioli et al. (2023) found that an intervention that provided target groups of pregnant women with cash transfers and nutrition education programs resulted in lower reported food insecurity, and improved dietary diversity, compared to the control group.

Other research into how the substantial changes in the rural economy during the NLD period are linked to food security outcomes have provided mixed and contradictory

findings. Analysing the same original dataset used in this paper, Pritchard et al., (2019a, b) found an association between livelihood diversification into the non-farm economy and improved household food security and individual dietary diversity. Cho et al. (2016), in a study of 80 households in the CDZ, found a positive relationship between crop diversification and improved food security, arguing that households with better access to credit, more farming experience, larger farm size and higher education level are more able to diversify their crops. On the other hand, analysis of the nationally representative LIFT survey of 3200 households (see LIFT, 2013) by Rammohan et al. (2018) found no significant relationship between crop diversity and child nutrition outcomes. In a later paper using the same data set drawn on for this paper, Vu and Rammohan (2022) found a correlation between agricultural production diversity and poorer child nutrition outcomes (stunting and wasting).

Accordingly, despite a wealth of research effort, the political and social dynamics of food (in)security at the village scale in contemporary rural Myanmar remain poorly understood. The broad links between wealth status and food security are well-documented, as well as regional patterns (for example peripheral mountainous areas such as Chin state typically perform worse on food insecurity and nutrition indicators than the central states (LIFT, 2013)). However, we lack an understanding of how these processes play out at more local scales. Insights that connect the concrete, everyday expressions of food (in)security with the socio-political dynamics of agrarian change in Myanmar are missing. This is a significant knowledge gap, as Myanmar is a highly culturally and agro-ecologically diverse country, where context-dependent political, ecological and institutional histories have shaped specific patterns of hunger, livelihoods and agrarian dynamics in different locales.

4 Methodology and case study

The Central Dry Zone is the name given to the central region of Myanmar, comprising of parts of western and central Mandalay region, southern Sagaing region, and most of Magway region. It sits in the rain shadow of the Arakan mountain range to the west and therefore receives significantly less annual rainfall than other parts of Myanmar. At the same time, the region is dissected by the Chindwin and Ayeyarwady rivers, among Myanmar's most important waterways. Historic settlements of past Burmese kingdoms dot the landscape, and the CDZ is considered to be the cultural and political cradle of the dominant Bamar ethnic group, including the historic cities of Mandalay and Bagan. The contemporary population of the CDZ is overwhelmingly rural, although the cities of Mandalay and Monywa are important and growing urban centres. Agriculture is

primarily rainfed, and agricultural livelihoods are therefore at the mercy of rainfall variability and water stress (Herridge et al., 2019). The area is a major producer of pulses, oilseed and coarse grain crops.

In this paper, we focus on one village in the Pakokku Township area of Magway region. Data from this village is drawn from a larger rural livelihoods, food security and nutrition survey of 2,920 households in 120 villages across Magway region, Ayeyarwady region, and Chin state (see Pritchard et al., 2018 for full survey methodology). This survey was conducted in two rounds, with a baseline survey in 2016 (February to April) and a follow up survey of the same households in 2017 (October to November), in order to capture the seasonal dynamics of hunger. In this paper we report data from the 2017 survey. In the case study village, 30 households were surveyed. The survey respondent was the female head of household or another adult female household member. The survey employed two indicators to assess food security and nutrition. First, the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) (Coates et al., 2007) was used to quantify the experience of food insecurity. We used an adapted HFIAS that produces a score of 0–33 based on respondents' answers to eleven questions that measured perceptions and feelings relating to the uncertainty and anxiety over food, insufficient quality and/or quantity of food, reductions in food intake, the consequences of reductions in food intake, and coping strategies. Respondents were asked to select one of the following options for each of the eleven questions: Never (= 0), Rarely (= 1), Sometimes (= 2) or Often (= 3). A higher score indicated a household facing greater problems of food insecurity. Second, we used a dietary diversity score (DDS) based on the Minimum Dietary Diversity – Women (MDD-W) metric developed by the FAO and partners (FAO, 2021). This DDS provides a measure of the nutritional quality of the respondent's diet, based on their reported consumption of ten defined food groups within the previous 24 h.² A score from 0–10 is produced (0 = no food items from the ten defined food groups consumed; 10 = food items from all ten defined food groups consumed), with a higher score indicating a higher probability that the respondent has a nutritionally adequate diet.

In addition to the survey, the case study village was selected for follow up qualitative research in 2016–2017, with additional qualitative work undertaken in 2019 by the second author. The qualitative methods involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the 30 households that

² The ten food groups are (1) starchy staple foods; (2) beans and peas (3) nuts and seeds; (4) dairy foods; (5) flesh foods; (6) eggs; (7) vitamin A-rich dark green leafy vegetables; (8) other vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables; (9) other vegetables; (10) other fruits.

Table 1 Wealth ranking for the case study village, detailing wealth groups and their characteristics (source: focus group)

	Better off landowners (1)	Upper middle landowners (2)	Lower middle land owners (3)	Poor landless (4)	Very poor landless (5)
Land holding	10–20 acres	3–8 acres	1–3 acres	Predominantly landless	Predominantly landless
Cropping pattern	Sesame, gram, pigeon pea, groundnut	Sesame, gram, pigeon pea, some groundnut	Sesame, gram, pigeon pea	N/A	N/A
Typical household assets	2–4 bullocks and carts; light trucks; some mechanized farm assets; brick house; motorbikes	2 bullocks; brick house; motorbikes	0–1 bullock; bamboo house usually with zinc roof; some have one motorbike	Palm frond or bamboo house; very few have motorbikes	Poor quality house or shelter, some without walls; scarce possessions
Dominant income source	Agriculture; increasingly non-farm income	Agriculture	Non-farm labouring; remittances	Non-farm labouring; remittances;	Daily wage labour (on farm)
Other income sources	Renting out assets (trucks etc.) to other households; money-lending; remittances	Remittances	Agriculture; daily wage labour (on farm)	Daily wage labour (on farm); goat herding	Goat herding
Hire in labour	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Hire out labour	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Estimated no. of households	10/88	25/88	20/88	20/88	15/88

participated in the two-round survey, and a wealth ranking exercise convened within a focus group format. The aim of the in-depth interviews was to elicit household narratives around livelihood practices and challenges, experiences of food and hunger, and individual life histories. Interviews were conducted in Burmese, and then transcribed and translated to English. The aim of the focus group and wealth ranking exercise was to elicit a grounded assessment of village-specific patterns of wealth, inequality and hunger. Further details of this research method are provided by Adams et al. (1997). As argued by Scoones (1995, p. 67), this type of approach can “reveal details of the historically, socially and economically constructed understandings of wealth and well-being of different [groups of] actors”. In our case, the method enabled exploration of how diet, food insecurity and livelihood activities are distributed among different ‘wealth groups’ within the village. It generated in-depth discussions amongst participants about important patterns of wealth and socio-economic difference, and empowered local actors to explore differentiated experiences of poverty and inequality in their own words and using locally relevant criteria. In this way, it helped us interpret how everyday practices were connected to broader structures and social relations.

In our study, the wealth ranking exercise focused on the households that participated in the survey and household interviews. Focus group participants ($n = 10$) were selected to represent a broad cross-section of the village (village council members, agriculturalists, landless workers, women,

school teacher, midwife).³ The focus group began with a discussion about how local people distinguish between better-off and less well-off households in the village. As a result of this discussion, the participants generated categories of households according to their socio-economic position (e.g. poor, middle, rich), named in locally appropriate terms. The participants were then asked to place cards representing the surveyed households into piles under each wealth category. Participants then elaborated on the characteristics held in common by the households falling within each wealth group (e.g. main livelihood activity, landownership, assets, demographics, ethnicity, education), differences between households in different groups, and reasons for these differences. A final discussion was then held about patterns of food insecurity and diet common to each identified wealth group.

5 Results

5.1 Wealth ranking

Table 1 presents the wealth ranking results for the case study village. The focus group participants stratified households into five distinct wealth groups. The names the participants agreed on for each wealth group (presented in the first row of the table) reflect emergent patterns of differentiation as

³ None of the surveyed households participated in the focus group and wealth ranking exercise.

connected to daily livelihood practices. The patterns that emerged in the village also reflect the different (and changing) role of land and agriculture in household livelihood patterns and accumulation. These wealth groups are inevitably fluid (particularly around the boundaries) and should be read as a qualitative approximation of wealth differentiation in the village. Table 1 displays perceptions by focus group participants of the main activities of each wealth group. When these data are triangulated with those from the household surveys and in-depth interviews, we see consistency between the wealth rank assigned to each households and different proxies of socio-economic position such as landholding, assets, and participation in wage labour that could be used to construct quantitative wealth indexes. For example, nine households were placed in the lowest wealth group. Data from the survey shows that seven of these are landless, while the other two have marginal holdings of 2 and 3 acres. The survey also shows that the majority of these households engage primarily in wage labour livelihood activities, with five relying on farm labour, and one having no livelihoods activities at all. None of these nine households have migrant household members or receive remittances. All except one of these households have houses made out of poor quality, temporary materials. In contrast, the survey shows that the four households placed in the highest wealth group have an average landholding of 11 acres, all have houses made of good quality, permanent materials, and all but one receive remittances from a migrant household member. We argue therefore that the wealth ranking represents a valid account of the emergent socio-economic structure of each village. The validity of the wealth ranking approach is also supported by previous research (Adams et al., 1997; Cramb et al., 2004; Hargreaves et al., 2007; Scoones, 1995; Scoones et al., 2012).

The benefit of this approach compared to constructing quantitative wealth quintiles is the ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) it enables in combination with the household interviews of the everyday livelihood practices and wealth patterns of each wealth group. To organize this description, we use the five questions of a combined agrarian political economy/livelihoods approach described above.

5.2 Everyday livelihood practices and wealth patterns

5.2.1 Who owns what

The village consists of 88 households located around 8 km from the Ayeyarwady River. It is isolated, having had an outside road connection only since 2005. There is around 230 acres of farmland within the village boundaries. The average farm size amongst is about seven acres. Around 40% of landowning households have more than five acres, and all

were assigned to wealth group one (WG1) or two (WG2). The key characteristic of households in WG1 is owning 10 acres or more of land. At the other extreme, 18 households, all in WG3, own just one acre. Landlessness is high: around 45% of households have no access to land. All landless households were assigned to WG4 or WG5 in the wealth ranking exercise. The survey and qualitative work revealed no renting in of land by landless households.⁴

Bullocks, farm machinery and tools and transport vehicles are important assets for the bigger landowners. Those with more than 10 acres own up to four bullocks, while those with smaller farms of one to three acres own a maximum of only one bullock. A number of landless households in WG4 and WG5 own goats. Housing quality is differentiated by wealth group with large landowners owning good quality brick houses, while poor landless households have palm frond or bamboo dwellings. Most landowning households own at least one motorbike. The village is not electrified, so households depend on either solar panels or batteries for electricity.

5.2.2 Who does what

Agriculture is still important to the livelihoods of landowning households in the village. Because of the distance to the river, farming is entirely rainfed, and cropping patterns typically focus on sesame, gram, pigeon pea and groundnut. Farming households in WG1 and WG2 with more land tend to grow more groundnut, as it is a more valuable cash crop. Yet the primary livelihood dynamic across all wealth groups is diversification away from agriculture. Only a few households from WG1 focus primarily on agriculture, while for most non-farm activities are increasingly important. These households use the financial assets they have built up over time to access relatively high-paying non-farm opportunities, including renting out trucks, moneylending, and other petty business activities in Mandalay city, around 160kms away. For example, as expressed by one household in this wealth group:

My two main sources of income are agriculture and the money sent back from Mandalay. My son moved there to try to get a better income for us. The wages are higher in Mandalay. My son's children live with me in the village, and my son returns to help me with the harvest (interview 22, WG1).

For households in WG2, agriculture remains the biggest source of income, yet these households are also increasingly

⁴ Other studies have also found little to no renting-in of farmland in the Dry Zone. Hein et al. (2017) point to low and unpredictable agricultural yields as one possible explanation.

supplementing their farm earnings with non-farm activities. For households in WG3 with smaller landholdings, agriculture is a secondary activity. These households depend on non-farm activities as their primary source of income. Predominantly, this is via remittances from temporary migrant household members undertaking petty business such as operating a small snack stall in Mandalay city.

Landless households with more family members or more assets send household members to work in construction in nearby towns, and a few also sell snacks at bus stops or on the roadside in Mandalay, sending home what they earn. Those in WG4 depend on non-farm activities, while the poorest households in WG5 rely on income from farm wage labour in the village, unable to pursue non-farm activities because of health problems, lack of assets and/or small household size. Goat herding and rearing is another important activity for some landless households. Goats are grazed on verges, roadsides, abandoned land and sometimes with permission on farmers' land. There is a mix between households who own their goats, and other households who 'share-raise' goats for a goat trader. For example, one household in the lowest wealth group recounted their move into goat herding:

I bought four goats with a loan and now I have ten goats. It is difficult to find food for goats during July–August. At this time, I feed them only dry grass and water. I can sell goats and goat's faeces to traders who come to the village. There are about seven households who raise goats in this village and mostly they are landless (interview 27, WG5).

5.2.3 Who gets what

Owning (more) land is the biggest differentiator of wealth in the village, however not just because of farm incomes. Landowning households, with 10 or more acres, can accumulate from farming. Crops such as sesame and groundnut can provide a somewhat dependable return and do not require much input or labour. Yet, access to labour is a limiting factor for all landowning households. Because of the increasing desire of landless households to pursue non-farm activities, farm wage labour is increasingly in short supply in the village and wages were increasing at the time of our research. Farm mechanization, though increasing in aggregate in Myanmar (Belton et al., 2021), has not replaced this labour in this village. There were no tractors in the village as of the time of our research. This means household demographics have an influence on accumulation patterns. For example, farming households with more household members can apply more family labour to agriculture and earn higher returns. Households with smaller farms and fewer household members of working

age cannot produce enough to make a decent living solely from agriculture. These households typically do not have the assets to either employ wage labour or hire/purchase farm machinery. One household from WG1 expressed the challenges around accessing farm labour:

Labour is more difficult to find starting from recent years and it is not only difficult to hire labour but wages are higher. Most of the young people in the village went to city for work. Only aged people are available to work in the agricultural activities. Now the people who work for agriculture are farmers, farmer's household members and old landless women (interview 15, WG1).

It is therefore the intensity and scale of engagement in non-farm income generating activities that increasingly shapes a household's fortunes. Yet as Li (2009) points out, rural households in Asia do not enter the non-farm economy on an even playing field. It is the accumulation of assets over time, predominantly land, that enables a household to successfully diversify. In this village, households in WG1 and WG2 can leverage their land-based assets and social networks to move into relatively higher paying non-farm activities. For example, the narrative of a household from WG1 reflects this dynamic. The household has leveraged land to buy a light truck that is used to run a crop transport business, while the two sons are able to rent a house in Mandalay, affording them the opportunity to secure regular wage work compared to the precarious and informal option of snack selling:

My father mortgaged three acres of our land and he bought light truck. We give another three acres to our relatives to grow crops with a benefit sharing system...My brothers are working in the bus station for loading and unloading goods...They rent a house in Mandalay...Now, our main household income is the money from my brothers and sister...We also sold our cattle before my siblings went to Mandalay (interview 03, WG1).

Smaller landowners in WG3 and landless households, lacking investible assets or capital, are typically only able to engage in lower paid and often precarious non-farm activities. These activities can improve the material living conditions of landless households, but don't offer pathways to accumulation. Two examples from the household interviews illustrate this:

Our son-in-law works as mason [bricklayer] in the city during summer since last 10 years. The period for working as a mason is only 20 days/year...migration can be a regular income job, but, we couldn't do it till now (interview 16, WG5).

My sister's husband is in Mandalay working as a high-way car tout. He sends remittances but not regularly, only every 3 months or so (interview 24, WG4).

One emerging accumulation pathway for landless households is goat rearing. As indicated above, a small number of households in WG4 and WG5 have been able to improve their economic circumstances by saving money and expanding their goat herd.

5.2.4 What do they do with it

Even as non-farm activities become increasingly important, households in WG1 continue to expand their land-based assets. Although there is not a dynamic land market in the village, better-off households will reinvest their earnings to increase their landholdings, often purchasing land from family members. Households able to save money are investing in accessing more lucrative non-farm activities for household members, such as starting businesses like goods trading, or undertaking more commercially-oriented snack food selling operations in Mandalay.

Households with smaller farms reinvest their agricultural earnings back into the farm (for example, repaying debts, inputs for next season etc.), but only at the level of simple reproduction. Any surplus is used to maintain migrant members working outside of the village. Remittances sent back from petty business activity in Mandalay are put towards household reproduction. Landless households in WG4 and WG5 have used remittances and other income to make important improvements in their material living conditions, yet still struggle to reduce the gap between them and better-off households.

6 Everyday political economies of food insecurity in the case study village

We now turn to how the everyday livelihood patterns and dynamics of village-scale differentiation described above connect to differentiated experiences of food insecurity in the village. In this section we focus on the fifth question of our EPE approach: how do social classes and groups in the village interact with each other? Table 2 compares the average HFIAS score and average MDD-W score for each wealth group. Not surprisingly, households assigned to a higher wealth group in the wealth ranking exercise reported fewer problems with food insecurity, represented by a lower HFIAS score. Yet, the dietary diversity scores reported in Table 2 do not appear, at face-value, to suggest an obvious correlation with wealth ranking results. For example,

Table 2 Wealth group and average food security indicators (source: survey data, second round)

Wealth group	N (Households)	HFIAS score (average)	MDD-W score (average)
1	4	2.5	6.5
2	3	6.3	5.6
3	6	7.8	6.3
4	8	7.4	6.2
5	9	9.5	4.1

households in WG1 and WG2 seem to consume similarly diverse diets to households in WG3 and WG4. However, the qualitative methods used in our study reveal that these summary data do not tell the full story. For example, take the role of flesh foods, which is one of the 10 categories measured in the MDD-W methodology and includes meat, poultry and fish. A respondent that answers yes to consuming any of those foods in the 24-h recall period is recorded as having a diet that includes flesh foods. Yet, it is clear from the qualitative data that there is an important political economy to the *type* of flesh food consumed. Respondents from households in the higher wealth groups described how they frequently eat beef. On the other hand, for most respondents from households in WG4 and WG5, 'consuming flesh foods' mostly takes the form of fish, often either a small amount of dried fish or fish paste (*ngapi*).⁵ For example:

*For breakfast I usually have rice and tomato fish paste.
For lunch I have rice and some pumpkin and chilli.
For dinner I will eat the same as lunch. I only eat meat about once or twice per month (interview 23, WG4).*

It is questionable whether an individual consuming small amounts of fish paste has a nutritionally equivalent diet compared with an individual regularly consuming beef. Further data such as the type and amount of fish consumed and amount and frequency of beef intake between the different households would be needed to compare the actual nutritional outcomes. What is clear, however, is that the standard MDD-W methodology is calibrated as a proxy measure of nutritional quality based in part on whether an individual consumes flesh foods or not. This aggregate measure does not address how the political economy of meat consumption differs between households. This does not invalidate the MDD-W as an indicator per se, but speaks to the importance of adapting dietary diversity indicators to local contexts as informed by in-depth qualitative data.

Table 3, based on the focus group wealth ranking discussions and the household interviews, categorizes the common experiences of hunger and food (in)security of each wealth

⁵ Fish paste is a basic cooking ingredient in the CDZ, akin to salt.

Table 3 Experiences of food insecurity and diet quality by wealth group (source: focus group)

	Better off landowners (1)	Upper middle landowners (2)	Lower middle land owners (3)	Poor landless (4)	Very poor landless (5)
Food security situation	Don't ever need to borrow money for food, and can purchase food in cash. Able to stock up on rice in advance	Rarely need to borrow food or money to purchase food. Can't afford to buy as many bags of rice at a time as the top group	Increasing access to remittances means that these households need to borrow food less than in past. Have to buy food on a daily basis (unable to stock up)	Forced to frequently borrow money from money lenders to buy food, or borrow rice from village shop	Very vulnerable to food insecurity. No stable source of income to purchase food. Depend on gifting of food or borrowing rice from village shop
Diet quality	Use more cooking oil than other households. Varied diet. Frequently consume meat (beef), but not every day	Similar to 'better off landowners', but can consume meat (beef) less often	Consume lower quality rice. Rarely consume meat (beef)	Typically always have enough (lower quality) rice to eat, but sometimes have to reduce quantities of vegetables. Rarely consume meat (beef)	Supplement lower quality rice diet with foraging for forest foods and seasonal vegetables such as roselle. Never or rarely consume meat (beef)

group. This enables a much richer picture of the different lived experiences of wealth and food insecurity than the indicators alone. All households in the village expressed at least some experience of food insecurity. Yet there are significant qualitative differences in these experiences between wealth groups. Food access for all households is predominantly via markets, not own production. In the interviews, the differentiated experience of food insecurity between wealth groups tended to be expressed in terms of households' capacities to buy bags of rice in advance, and whether they were regularly reliant on borrowing food or money to buy food.

Also revealed by the qualitative data is that the food security experience of a household is heavily dependent on combining the security of land ownership with capacity to diversify into remunerative and secure non-farm livelihood activities. For example, household 06 faced a difficult food security situation in the past. Then, around ten years ago, it was able to secure their educated daughter a government job paying a regular salary. They combine this with farming on 10 acres and income from sewing longyi⁶:

Our household has improved in the past ten years because one daughter got a government job as a teacher... ten years ago, we needed to borrow money for food especially during summer. Now, we don't need to do it because of the income from sewing and the salary from the government job (interview 06, WG2).

Those households in the lowest wealth group face daily struggles and difficult decisions around food. Household 11 is landless. The female head of household who we interviewed explained that her parents were also landless and worked as farm labourers. The household ekes out an everyday existence with odd jobs and insecure wage labour, often struggling to feed their two children. This forces the household into difficult livelihood decisions, for example sacrificing education, that can reproduce wealth group divisions over time:

Since our income is unstable, it's hard for me to care much about nutrition for the kids...because we are struggling, I am thinking to drop my daughter out from school next year and send her to Mandalay to work in a garment factory, even though she wants to continue to study (interview 11, WG5).

The differentiated experiences of wealth and food security of different households are intimately connected, and these connections are manifested in everyday interactions and practices. Relationships around agricultural land ownership remain the most important shaper of socio-economic differentiation. Notwithstanding the increasing role of non-farm

⁶ Traditional Myanmar clothing.

activities for all wealth groups, many landless and even some small landowning households still depend (at least in part) on labouring on the farms of other households in the village. This relationship can extend to money lending and debt, with poorer households often forced to borrow money from richer households to buy food and other household needs. In some cases this has led to land changing hands, for example:

I have also lent money to other landowners who put up their land as collateral. I can then use their land while the person is in debt to me. When they could not pay back the loan, I bought their land off them at a reduced price to account for their debt (interview 22, WG1).

Landless households are compelled to sell their labour in order to be able to eat. When that labour is farm labour, this places landless households in an exploitative relationship with the land owner.⁷ Farm labour is also typically seasonal and irregular. For landless households without regular income, hunger is a daily worry, especially in seasons where there is little farm work. Household 09 has been unable to access non-farm opportunities and depends on income from farm labour on the farms of other villagers:

I worry every month about food...we are landless and rely on buying food daily. I think our situation is a bit worse than other households. Other people can buy more variety of vegetables and meat. We have to rely on what we can freely pick (interview 09, WG5).

Compare this to the diet of household 22, from WG1. This household owns 11 acres and has been buying land from other households in the village. It employs 10 labourers per day to work on its farm during the harvest season, and also lends money to other households in the village:

I don't have any food security concerns. For breakfast I have rice, peas fried in oil, which is our traditional breakfast. For lunch I have rice, vegetables, some local vine vegetables, beef and eggs. For dinner it is the same. I eat beef and eggs about four times per week (interview 22, WG1).

The accumulation of wealth and hence food security of household 22 is premised on the unequal ownership of land and the employment of low-paid wage labour. Even in the situation of rising farm wages, the food security of this household goes hand-in-hand with the food insecurity of households like number 09 above. Household 22's envious

situation is also a result of intergenerational wealth. The male head of household's parents own 40 acres themselves. The household has leveraged those land assets to diversify into other non-farm income streams, furthering their advantage over households such as number 09.

There are some examples in the village of households in the lower wealth groups challenging these patterns of social differentiation and food insecurity. Non-farm livelihood opportunities such as goat rearing, have enabled some landless households to avoid exploitative farm labour, where these households instead become more akin to petty business operators. For example:

I think working outside agriculture is better for income generation as agricultural work is very seasonal... We are able to eat more meat when we get money transferred from my younger brother and when we sell our goats (interview 30, WG5).

Even precarious non-farm activities like snack selling can help a household break cycles of food insecurity. Household 27 comprises of a widow with three children, two of whom are of working age. In the past, the household depended on income from farm labour. Via a micro-lending scheme, the household invested in goats and has expanded its herd to ten. One son and a daughter now work in Mandalay selling snacks. The household no longer engages in farm labouring, and our interviewee expressed their improved situation in terms of their more varied diet:

I think my household's economic condition has improved because of more job opportunities in the city. In the past, I could not afford to eat apples, grapes and oranges. Now, I can eat these fruits as my children buy fruits and snacks for me from Mandalay. I feel more relaxed about our household food (interview 27, WG5).

7 Conclusion

This paper has shown the intimate connections between the politics and practices of everyday life and the experience of food insecurity in one village in Myanmar's CDZ. Our everyday political economy approach provides a holistic understanding of food insecurity and *difference*. Our analysis shows that differentiated experiences of food insecurity emerge out of expressions of everyday livelihood activities and political relations between social groups. The context of Myanmar's rapidly changing economy at the time we undertook the research sometimes challenged but more often reproduced unequal patterns of wealth and hunger. In other words, in this village and in broader agrarian landscapes "the social world is reproduced or transformed in daily life"

⁷ Here we use exploitation in the technical, Marxian sense. Marx argues that the basis of exploitation under capitalism is the forced appropriation by those that own the means of production of surplus value produced by workers. In the case of agriculture, for example, a worker receives a lesser value (in the form of daily wages) than the value the worker produces for the landowner.

(Bhaskar, 1989, p. 4), including social configurations of diet and food insecurity.

Returning to the research questions posed in the introduction, what does our EPE approach tell us about these connections in our case study village? First, we have shown how our mixed-methods approach reveals the differentiated experience of food security and diet beyond what indicators can show. In this village, the everyday experience of food insecurity for worse off households means borrowing money from other households to buy food, consuming lower quality rice than other households, and rarely being able to consume beef. It means not being able to stock up on bags of rice like their better-off neighbours can. In our quantitative survey, these everyday experiences are flattened by the indicators, including the hidden politics of meat consumption that was revealed in the focus group and qualitative interviews.

Second, our approach also reveals mechanisms of reproduction of the relationship between inequality and food insecurity at the household scale. In our case study village, agriculture remains the most important income generating activity for some households. Yet, 45% of households in this village have no access to land, a figure that is consistent across the CDZ, and higher in other parts of the country (Belton et al., 2021; Vicol and Pritchard, 2021; Belton & Filipinski, 2019). Landless households that depend on farm labouring were ranked as the poorest households, and consistently expressed significant food insecurity. Through dependent and exploitative relations with large landowning households, akin to a classical capital-labour class relation, their social position and food insecurity is constantly reproduced in everyday life. Yet, there is an increasingly complex relationship between land ownership, agriculture and agricultural labour, and non-farm livelihood activities that shape a household's wealth position and its food security experience. It is the scale and intensity of engagement in non-farm livelihood activities that makes the biggest difference to a household's diet and food security. Some landless or poorer landowning households have begun, in some small yet significant ways, to disrupt everyday political-economic relations and wealth patterns via 'stepping out' (Dorward et al., 2009) into income generating activities in nearby cities or goat rearing. According to the household interviews, the daily experience of diet and food security has improved for some of these households as a result. This reflects processes in other parts of Myanmar and Southeast Asia more generally: non-farm activities are becoming more important for households in all wealth groups (Pritchard et al., 2019a, b; Rigg, 2006; Rigg et al., 2016). However, these emerging patterns of non-farm livelihoods have their own political economy that can often further entrench the advantage of wealthier households (Li, 2009; Vicol et al., 2018). Non-agricultural livelihood opportunities for household members from lower wealth groups are more often limited to

unskilled, often casual and precarious activities. On the other hand, mirroring the dynamics of livelihood diversification in other parts of Myanmar (Vicol et al., 2018), better-off landowning households can use their assets to move into more remunerative non-farm activities like moneylending, salaried work, or renting out machinery, furthering their advantage over other households. This speaks to the ongoing importance of land ownership as central to wealth and food security in rural Myanmar, yet not via a simple "land equals agricultural production" pathway (Pritchard et al., 2019a, b). Instead, land is increasingly an asset that can be leveraged to enter the non-farm economy on the most advantageous terms.

The broad processes are generalizable, although their specific manifestations will vary from village-to-village dependent on history, context and the serendipity of events. Opportunities for landless households to diversify into goat rearing, as occurred in our case study village, for example, may not be present in other village contexts. Yet this, precisely, is the point. An important contribution of the everyday political economy approach is to engage with context and difference (Rigg, 2016). Our results and approach hold important implications for both food security research and policy. First, we argue that this case study challenges the still dominant narrative within many development institutions that food security will be achieved by focusing on agricultural development in the rural Global South. It also provides a corrective to essentialist rural policy discourses that conceptualize an undifferentiated landscape of smallholder households with identical interests. In Myanmar in the period to 2021, rural development and food security policy and praxis were dominated by a smallholder- and market-led agricultural development narrative, where rural livelihoods and hence food security were to be improved primarily via agricultural value-chain development interventions (Vicol & Pritchard, 2021). Given the high rates of landlessness and the shifting dynamics around agriculture, land and non-farm livelihoods we describe above, such an approach in this context is likely to be inequality *widening* while further exacerbating the differentiated experience of food insecurity. An EPE approach can instead identify contextually relevant points for intervention that can disrupt prevailing socio-political relations. Focusing on education and skills training, social welfare support, mobility and even land reform would have more impact on the most vulnerable households in our case study than commercial agriculture-focused interventions.

Second, an EPE approach can contribute to a more holistic research agenda to reveal the hidden politics and complexity of wealth, food insecurity and diet. The EPE approach centres the differentiated experience of local people, and how food insecurity and diet are shaped by everyday political economic relations and practices. Food security

studies should emphasize individual livelihood practice, experience and diversity while also paying attention to the social relations that pattern diet and food insecurity. This brings attention to how individuals and households attempt to navigate and sometimes challenge emergent patterns of advantage and disadvantage, and by extension, of food security and insecurity. It also reveals questions and themes that are actually relevant to the everyday lives of ordinary people. In the case study village this means, for example, that focusing research on the relationship between agricultural production diversity and food security metrics is questionable in a context where landlessness is rife and agriculture is becoming less important to livelihoods: where increasing agricultural productivity or diversification would disproportionately benefit the wealthiest three quintiles because they are the landowners. Constructing everyday political economies of food insecurity is therefore an important first step to a deeper concrete theorization of food futures and food justice in Myanmar and elsewhere.

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Data availability Data is available upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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