



Taking a break - A farmer and her child. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima



# Portrait of a Village

**Small but important changes are happening in Myanmar's agricultural heartland. Just ask farmer U Thein Win.**

**Eva Casper**

**A**bout three years ago U Thein Win stopped wishing for things - he just bought them. Things like the big grey fridge in his kitchen from where one of his young daughters immediately takes out two cold beverage cans to serve to guests while they sit down to talk about the changes in his village.

Having a fridge is still a luxury in Myanmar where you often see people carrying around huge ice blocks to cool their drinks if only for a few hours.

The thing 50-year-old U Thein Win owes his new wealth to stands in his courtyard and is about 6,000 pounds in weight and nine feet high - a rice harvesting machine.

He bought the machine three years ago in Yangon for US\$3,500, quite a sum in his village where annual per capita income hovers around the US 1,000 level.

## **The country starts opening up**

Before the opening of the country, he could not buy such a machine, as the product was not being imported.

But shortly after President U Thein Sein came to power with his "reformist agenda," U Thein Win made the decision that would change his life. He bought the machine and started to rent it to the farmers around the area for US\$35 per hectare. Today he earns about 70 percent more than in the past, he says. And he can afford things like the fridge, a flat screen television and a solar power system to generate electricity.





U Thein Win's harvesting machine in action. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima

Before he made this bold move, U Thein Win was a normal farmer like all the other 300 inhabitants of the small village named Sin Za Loke in the Bago region totally dependent on his rice crop. But he was savvy in how he traded his rice and was able to build his savings to afford to buy the machine.

At the beginning of this new cycle, his business went so well that he bought a second machine and even considered buying a third one but then dismissed this idea. "There is too much competition now."

### Revolution in the heartland?

In this region there are only a few farmers who still do the harvest by hand, he says. Most of them rent a machine and more people are entering the business of renting out harvesting machines.

Although one could call U Thein Win a rich and successful man, who owes his wealth to the positive developments in the country, he is suspicious about suggestions that the situation is improving in his country.

"I wish for things to improve but I'm not sure about it. We still have to watch the government carefully," he says, referring to the democrat-

ic process that began under Thein Sein and is continuing under Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy-led government.

Most important for the village would be a new road and electricity. That is not only the wish of U Thein Win but of almost every inhabitant of the village.

If you leave Yangon for Sin Za Loke you will travel for a long time along the highway between the former capital and Mandalay that was finished in 2010. It is a comfortable road - if you compare it to that one you will enter if you leave the highway to get to the village - a dusty, narrow, dirt potholed road frequented by ox-carts.

It's a step back in time, little changed over the centuries, one that leaves inhabitants with dust in their mouths and eyes.

### Proud of their dirt road

Although the road is in a pitiful state the villagers are still proud of it.

"We have worked on this road for ten years," says U Sein Win, who has served as the headman of the village for 34 years. It was built and paid for not by the local government but by the inhabitants. They never

considered asking the government for support for the road.

"We knew that they didn't care. We knew we had to build it by ourselves," says U Sein Win. The 63-year-old man grew up in Sin Za Loke. At the young age of 24, he became head of the village.

He works as a farmer because he only gets a pittance from the government for his work.

Standing in the courtyard of his farmhouse, next to two motorcycles and a bicycle, he explained how he was a go-between under the old military regime for the villagers.

He used to negotiate to protect the interests of the villagers, for example if one of them could not pay their share of rice due from every farmer to be handed to the Army.

He says during all that time, they never had big trouble with the government.

U Sein Win and U Thein Win belong to a generation that internalised their dealings with the government seen as unpopular and frightening, trying to avoid government officials and not doing anything to raise their ire.

U Sein Win recognises that during the last few years things have

improved for the village. Since 2012, more and more inhabitants bought solar powered electricity systems or motorcycles, as well as machines to improve their farming processes. But, he says, he doesn't know if the positive changes are because of the Thein Sein government or just because there is now a more open economy.

### Still no electricity

The villagers built and paid for the dirt road themselves. But they cannot afford the electricity poles and equipment to bring electricity to the village.

"Two years ago we had a meeting with the government and we discussed how we could get electricity to the village. But since then nothing has happened," said U Sein Win, though he admitted the local authorities have been more open to the villagers' ideas and criticism.

According to the World Bank, over 80 percent of households in the rural areas of Myanmar have no access to electricity. Even the solar systems are not very powerful and they often do not work in the rainy season. That hinders not only the inhabitants of the village in having a more comfortable life but also the businesses they are running.

Without electricity U Thein Win cannot fix his machines and has to send the broken parts to the next town - that costs time and money.

Lack of electricity is not the only problem of the village. They don't have a doctor. If a person gets seriously ill, they have to be taken to the nearest town which is 20 minutes away and the hospital there is not well-equipped, says U Sein Win.

The school in the village can only offer eight grades of schooling. After that, the children have to go to the town to continue their education and not every family can afford that.

### Locked into farming

What kinds of occupation remain for children if they stay in the village without further education? The main option is to be a farmer. And as a farmer, your wealth depends on that what you already own and the amount of land you are able to farm.

U Min Lwin, 53, is one of the lucky ones. He has 45 hectares of land near to the village, and even more importantly, near to the river. Six years ago the local government built a dam on the river. Now U



U Thein Win stands proudly in front of the machine that has changed his life. Photo: U Thein Win

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Midday meal for the farmers, taking a break from bringing in the rice crop. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima

Min Lwin can flood his fields and grow rice and beans the whole year through. Before that, he could only plant vegetables during the rainy season. Back then, his income was much smaller and also the quality of the rice was not as good.

"The summer rice is the best rice," he says. "The weather during the rainy season causes problems for the plants."

Today it is time to harvest his precious summer rice. He leaves his house in the village to stay in a hut next to his fields, a place you can only reach by a 15-minute journey over a seriously potholed road, and through a shallow river.

Here he harvests the rice with the rice harvesting machine, packs it up in sacks and carries them back to the village by ox-cart – a mix of the old and new.

### Harvester proves a godsend

In former times it took three to five days to harvest only one hectare by hand, says U Min Lwin. Now the machine only needs one hour for the same size field. He says they will be done with harvest in about three days, whereas in the past it used to take up to 50 days.

Furthermore, due to the opening of the market, U Min Lwin is now able to buy high-quality fertiliser and herbicides that have almost doubled the volume of his crops, he says.

For him, life has completely

changed.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the introduction of mechanization and an upgrading of farming practices – including the increased use of herbicides, pesticides and fertiliser – is providing the first sparks of a farming revolution in this former Rice Bowl of Asia. But there is still a long way to go.

### Land ownership remains an issue

U Bo Bo faces a different situation. The farmer only has three hectares of land, too far from the river to irrigate. So he has to rely on growing one crop of rice during the rainy season.

Where U Bo Bo does benefit from the opening up of the economy is the extra daily pay of about 2,000 Kyat that he receives for working on other people's farms.

As U Bo Bo, 30, explains, U Min Lwin faces trouble in finding workers to help him in the fields.

"They are all going to the city to find a job," he says.

U Bo Bo cannot go to the city. "It is very expensive. You need money to pay the ride to the city and to rent an apartment."

But U Bo Bo also doesn't want to leave. "Here I have my family and my own house."

It is hard for him to earn the US\$100 per month he needs to feed his family. But he is staying put, supplementing his meagre income

with collecting firewood to sell when there is no work in the fields.

"What we need most is money to invest and a market to sell our products," he says.

He is not lucky like U Min Lwin or U Thein Win. He doesn't have enough land to survive on and his income is too small to put money aside. He also wishes to have electricity and to buy a cooker, to avoid using wood.

"It has become hard to find wood. We have to travel much more than five years ago when there was all forest around the village," he says.

Today there is no hint left that there was ever a lush green forest with the wild elephants the inhabitants remember. The only thing to see are endless dry rice fields.

His is the daily grind of labouring from sunrise to sunset for 5,000 Kyat a day. And sometimes working into the night, given the harvesting machine has a spotlight.

U Thein Win has his harvesting machine, placing him a step up the financial ladder. But for other farmers, it is a struggle to survive.

As a group of farmers sit relaxing under a star-filled sky, enjoying the cooler air, the question of what they wish for is brought up.

One of them looks up into the sky and comes up with an easy answer: "I wish I could be rich."