Subsistence-oriented agriculture in the lowlands, on nutrient-rich soils in valley bottoms and on frequently nutrient-poor substrata on the slopes of the mountain regions, is the most important economic pillar of the country and the main basis of employment. As during the British colonial period (more than 68% employed in agriculture; Storz 1967: 157; Saito/Lee 1999: 26) and upon the introduction of a market-oriented economy after 1988 (1990/91: 65.5%; Saito/Lee 1999: 30), about 61.2% (MoAI 2013) of all workers are employed in agriculture today (Khin Khin Soe/Yin Yin Lwin 2015). The sector contributes a good third of gross domestic product, i.e. 36.4% of national GDP (2012-13) and 17.5% of total export earnings (Aung Kyaw et al. 2013). About 26% of the country’s entire area is used for agriculture and permanent crops (MoAI 2013). In 2010-2011, the area under paddy accounted for 70% of the total arable area and it contributed about 30% of Myanmar’s gross agricultural and 95% of total cereal output. Less than 20% of agricultural land is artificially irrigated; this is primarily located in the Ayeyarwady Delta, near the Bago Yoma dams, in the drier central area (dry zone) and parts of the north of the country.

The most important product for domestic consumption is rice. Rice is also Myanmar’s main agricultural product and the second most important exportable agricultural commodity after beans and pulses, and is thus a very important income source for farmers. Total paddy production was 18,580 (000’MT) in 1995-96 and increased to 27,704 (000’MT) in 2012-13; cropping intensity increased from 140.5% in 1995-96 to 158.3% in 2012-13 (Settlement and Land Records Department 2013). Rice production is concentrated in the Ayeyarwady Delta and occupies about 40% of the 15.85 million ha of cultivated land (FAO 2005: 5, Aung Kyi 2006). The agricultural crops with the highest yields are, according to their production (2012-13): sugar cane, blackgram, maize, groundnuts, greengram, onions, vegetables, potatoes, cotton, natural rubber, fruits and tea (Settlement and Land Records Department 2013). Moreover, oilseeds, pulses, cotton and soya beans are important crops (FAO 2005: 5). Animal husbandry is practised nationwide, with a focus on poultry in the Ayeyarwady Delta and pigs in the mountain regions and in the north of the country. Pasture land is developed in the Sagaing, Bago, Magway, Mandalay and Yangon Regions and Mon State (Than Than Htay 2012: 155). Dairy farming in the mountain regions of Shan, Kayah and Kachin States has been declining for some years; there are not enough pastures due to deforestation and the expansion of tillage.

Of the 4.8 million farming families that live solely or predominantly from agriculture, 63% have access to less than 2 ha of agricultural land (small farmers and landless farmers are included in the statistics), 25% have 2-4 ha and 13% have more than 4 ha (Ardeth Maung Thawghhmung 2003, Aung Kyi 2006). While small farmers mostly practise subsistence farming, larger farms, including plantations, are either under state control (state-owned enterprises), government-favoured enterprises or in the hands of foreign investors (indirectly, as these can only act through intermediaries).

Basic food security for the country’s population has not been a problem in the past, with the exception of wartime: rice was always available in sufficient quantities, even if not all regions produced constant surpluses. However, the quality of the supply is not secure countrywide, especially among small farmers and agricultural labourers, the majority of whom are landless. Food expenditure amounts to