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## A REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF COLLECTORS IN VIETNAM'S RICE VALUE NETWORK

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### **Abstract**

According to the announcement by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Ministry of Planning and Investment (2012), from six to nine per cent of Vietnam's rice product is bought under written contracts, while most of the remaining rice is delivered to the market through indirect channels, in which the farmers rely on collectors or intermediaries. Interestingly, this business partnership is a verbal agreement that is not enforced by a legally binding contract; instead, it is a long-term cooperation. Through analyzing the characteristics of the collaborative culture and the small-scale production of Vietnamese farmers, we found that the advantages of these transactions and the trust between collectors and farmers lead to ease of cooperation. In the past, when there were no large traders or enterprises in Vietnam economy, the collectors played an important role in the flow of goods; they were the connector in the small-scale peasant economy. In their current role, collectors understand what farmers need, such that 90 per cent of farmers get market information from the collectors. This study shows that Vietnamese collectors are acting as connectors between farmers and enterprises. Therefore, this force needs to be considered an important component of the rice value network of Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Farmers, Collectors, Rice, Verbal Agreement, Trust, Vietnam.

**JEL Classification:** D91, Q12, Q13.

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## 1. Status of Vietnam's Rice Production

Rice is the staple food and the revenue source of millions of farmers, especially the poor in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> After nearly 30 years since historical milestones of socio-economic reform in 1986 (Doi Moi),<sup>2</sup> one of the greatest achievements of Vietnamese agriculture has been the development of the rice industry. From a country lacking food in the seventies and early eighties, by 1989, Vietnam became a rice exporter. Recently, according to the FAO (2017), Vietnam ranks fourth in Far East Asia in terms of rice production and fifth in the world for rice exporting (p.p.23, 34). The General Statistic Office and General Department of Vietnam Customs reported that in 2016, total rice production in Vietnam was about 43.6 million tons, of which about 4.88 million tons were exported, accounting for 11.2 per cent of the total amount of rice produced.

In Vietnam, national rice production is distributed in six basic economic zones, of which three of the most important are Red River Delta, North Central and Central coastal areas and the Mekong River Delta (Table 1). The Mekong River Delta contributes half of the country's rice production and over 90 per cent its export output (Trung Chanh, 2017). With nearly 2 million households cultivating on more than 2 million hectares of land, the Mekong River Delta is a fragmentary assemblage of millions of small-scale farmers (Vo, Le, and Nguyen, 2015, p.128). In terms of the season, there are 3 rice crops per year, winter-spring (from February to April), summer-autumn (from June to August), and minor winter (from October to December); winter-spring is the main crop with the best quality of rice (Nguyen, 2013, p. 3).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Vu and Glewwe (2011, p.18), about 86 per cent of rural Vietnamese were farmers, and two-thirds grow rice. Overall, 76 per cent of rice farmers were in the poorest quintile, while 18 per cent were in the richest quintile.

<sup>2</sup> The Reform in 1986 was the early stage of economic development in Vietnam. From this time, the private property rights and the private economy began to be recognized, which helped farmers to produce crops and individuals to take part in agribusiness. This led to incredible growth of the agriculture sector.

**Table 1:** Rice Acreage and Production in Vietnam

| Year |                                  | Vietnam | Red River Delta | North Central and Central Coastal Areas | Mekong Delta |
|------|----------------------------------|---------|-----------------|---|--------------|
| 2010 | Planted area (thousand hectares) | 7489.4  | 1129.9          | 1214.1                                  | 3495.9       |
|      | Production (thousand tons)       | 40005.6 | 6805.4          | 6152                                    | 21595.6      |
| 2013 | Planted area (thousand hectares) | 7902.5  | 1150.1          | 1230.4                                  | 4340.3       |
|      | Production (thousand tons)       | 44039.1 | 6655.4          | 6599.7                                  | 25021.1      |
| 2015 | Planted area (thousand hectares) | 7830.6  | 1110.9          | 1220.5                                  | 4304.1       |
|      | Production (thousand tons)       | 45105.5 | 6729.5          | 6855.1                                  | 25598.2      |
| 2016 | Planted area (thousand hectares) | 7790.4  | 1093.9          | 1215.4                                  | 4295.2       |
|      | Production (thousand tons)       | 43609.5 | 6578.8          | 6878.9                                  | 24226.6      |

Source: GSO, 2016.

Despite many achievements in the rice sector, small-scale production<sup>3</sup> has not improved to reach the level of specialized commodity production due to land fragmentation (Hoang, 2008). As the most farmers have been cultivating on small cropland for generations, the agricultural production is highly fragmented. According to a Vietnam Development Report by the World Bank (2016, p. 10), in 2011, 95 per cent of Vietnam's agricultural households cultivated on less than two hectares of cropland (Figure 1). In 2017, the country had more than 14 million farm households, 80 per cent of which produced on about 0.56 hectares of agricultural land.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, infrastructure and transportation in many regions of Vietnam are of low quality, making it difficult to transport agricultural products from the fields to warehouses. Rice in the northern and central regions is mainly

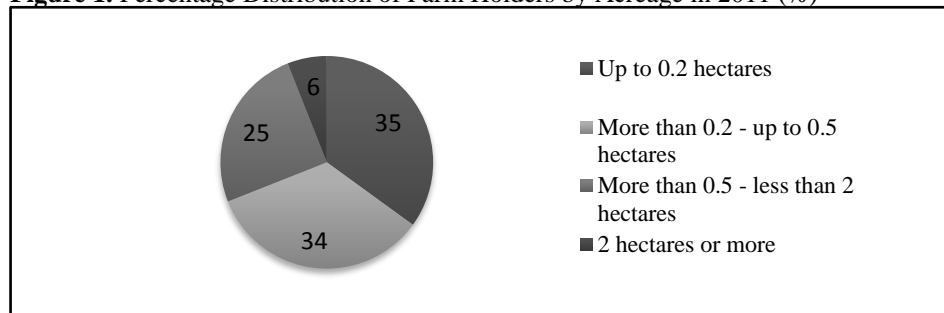
<sup>3</sup> Smallholders are farmers with less than two hectares of cropland (World Bank, 2003, p.6, citing Okidegbe 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Nguyen (2017) reported that there are more than 14 million farm households producing over 70 million land plots, with a total area of more than 10 million hectares. Most of the households have four land plots for cropping, where each plot is an average of 0.14 hectares. See more on

<http://www.nhandan.com.vn/chinhtri/item/33298402-can-minh-bach-cong-bang-trong-don-thua-doi-ruong.html>

transported by collectors on bicycles and "cyclos" due to the narrow and sloped roads, while in the south, carts and boats are used due to the dense waterway network (Alavi and Others 2012, p,117; IFPIR, 1996, p.p.121, 124; Ishikawa 2009, p.10). These conditions have allowed the role of collectors to become more prominent in Vietnam's agricultural sector.

**Figure 1.** Percentage Distribution of Farm Holders by Acreage in 2011 (%)



**Source:** World Bank, 2016, p.10

According to the economic opinions of scientists and management officers, the large number of collectors involved in Vietnam's rice production might be expected to incur a transaction cost, making Vietnam's supply of rice cumbersome and inefficient. This would mean that farmers have to sell rice at cheaper prices and food companies have to buy it at more expensive prices than if farmers and firms were to directly cooperate. In addition, if collectors do not have appropriate storage and milling conditions, this may lead to reduced the rice quality by the time it arrives at the food companies' warehouses. Therefore, collectors are seen to have negative impacts on the value of Vietnamese rice. To reduce these negative consequences, researchers have proposed that agricultural contracts between farmers and food companies would help to increase the value of rice and ensure a higher income for the farmer (ADB, 2005; Glover and Kusterer, 2016; Minot and Roy, 2006; Nguyen, Dzator and Adolny, 2015), indicating eliminating the intermediate actors (Nham, 2012, p.p. 162, 163). However, the reality is that the percentage of contract farming is minor, i.e. only a small proportion of farmers can adopt this kind of cooperation. For the majority of farmers, the collectors are the only ones who deal with their output.

This research, which explores this issue from the viewpoint of the farmers, demonstrates the benefits that collectors bring to farmers and asserts that, in the context of weak linkages between farmers and food businesses, collectors need to be recognized as having an important economic role.

## 2. The Paddy/Rice Supply Chain in Vietnam

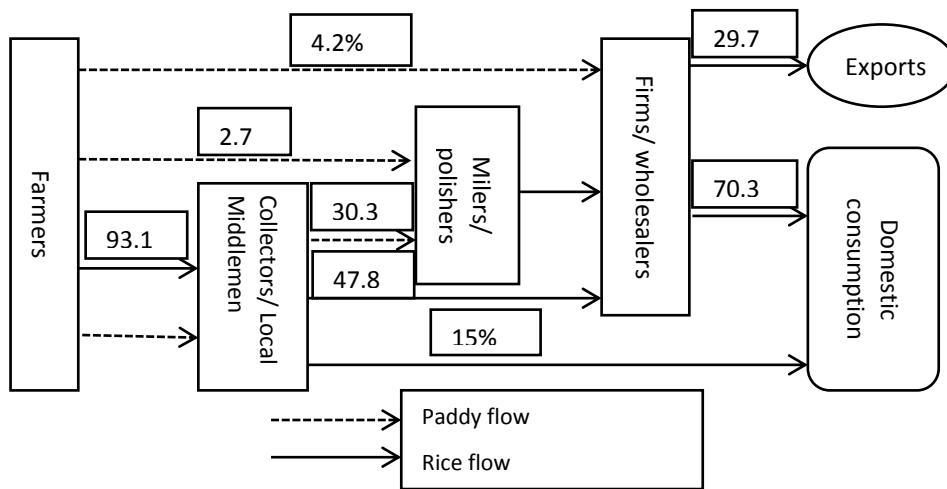
Vietnam's paddy/rice network has basically been in place for a long time. Many actors are involved in the activities of planting, purchasing, and transporting rice. So far, Vietnam's paddy/rice supply chain has two main flows (Figure 2).

First, food companies can sign written contracts directly with farmers. This channel has not yet been widely applied, as it occupies six to nine per cent of the rice product (Tran and Do, 2013, p.77). According to Article 2, Decision 80/2002/ĐQ-TTG and a report by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, there are currently three main types of contracts in Vietnam, depending on the level of association: (1) *Consumption contract*, in which, before crops, a company makes a contract with farmers. Here, the quantity and price of products are determined in advance. Typically, large firms do not operate under this kind of contract due to the risk of product quality and actual price volatility. (2) An *underwriting contract* is when a firm provides seed, credit, and some equipment necessary for farmers to produce crops according to technical requirements. After evaluating the products and subtracting the investments, the company will pay the farmers. This contract is often used by large enterprises to ensure product quality and corporate reputation. However, in such cases, firms are considered monopolists in supporting agricultural facilities and examining the product quality, and they are likely to be distrusted by farmers, as the firms may use exploitative practices to earn more profits. For instance, firms may set higher prices for input materials and underestimate the quality of outputs to reduce the amount they must pay to farmers. In addition, there also may be some proportion of unfaithful farmers, who sell a portion of the product to collectors if the market price is higher than the contracted price. (3) Finally, *large fields* are a collection of conveniently located cropland, that is used by food companies. Farmers of this cropland will then contract with the business to produce crops on their own plots, according to the firms' technical requirements and inputs. In this way, the farmer is regarded as a worker of the enterprise and is paid depending on their productivity. This type of association is mainly funded by corporations or state-owned enterprises via government projects. The strength of this contract is that it avoids fragmented production, ensuring the uniform quality and stable supply of crops for firms. However, it requires a lot of time and money to gather many plots. Furthermore, uneven soil quality also requires time and recovery costs. Most importantly, when such contracts are terminated, there are usually disputes between farmers during re-division of the field. Among the three contract farming types mentioned above, only the last one is a secure long-term contract; the other two are short-term business deals with higher chances of deception.

The second flow, which is common in Vietnam, is where enterprises collect raw rice from intermediate actors like collectors, traders, or mills, and then process rice for domestic consumption or exportation. In this type of operation, collectors play an important role and are the main actor in agricultural product flow.

According to the Vietnam Food Association, it is estimated that every year, collectors buy 90 per cent of farmers' paddy/rice, then distribute them to other places. In the Mekong Delta, 93.1 per cent paddy/rice is directly sold to collectors, while a small proportion of products is traded with food companies (Vo and Nguyen, 2011, p.100).

**Figure 2.** Paddy/Rice Chains in the Mekong Delta, Drawing on Vo and Nguyen (2011)



In the rice industry, collectors emerged very early on and have continued to play an important role in the rice supply chain in Vietnam due to the small-scale agricultural production characteristics of the peasants and the unfavorable traffic (narrow and steep roads in the north and a network of rivers and canals in the south). According to the Vietnam Research Center for Development and Agricultural System, there are numerous small-scale collectors operating independently in the market, doing simple business without speculation or hoarding. In the Mekong River Delta, only 0.02 per cent of collectors are private firms that own warehouses and stores and 8.3 per cent represent an organization or an enterprise; the remaining are small dealers. Additionally, most Mekong River Delta collectors have small-scale capital, whereby 70 per cent of collectors own USD12,500-20,800 (VND300-500 million) and 22 per cent own USD20,800-50,000 (VND500-1,200 million) of capital capacity.

The cooperation between farmers and collectors is described as follows: Before the crop season, a collector comes to a farmer to set up a trading relationship with verbal agreements on paddy/ rice production, payment methods, and transportation. If the farmer does not agree, he can choose to cooperate with another collector. Otherwise, he will carry out the cultivation. After harvesting, the collector comes to evaluate the quality of paddy/rice and determine the price. As the farmer already has some information about market prices, he can negotiate

until both are satisfied. Then, the collector pays in cash and takes the product immediately. However, due to the non-written contract, there should be risks for the farmer, such as if, after harvesting, the collector does not come to farmers or underestimates the quality of products to avoid purchasing them. In this case, the farmer would be relegated to a passive position where he could not look toward any legal agency to help him. In most cases, he would have to sell to other dealers or consumers at a lower price to ensure the process of reproduction. As the result, the farmer would suffer a loss.

In economics, a written and legally enforceable contract may protect the farmer. Even with the risk of repression by the firms or price fluctuations, farmers can still sell products to their partner companies. Conversely, a verbal arrangement carries more risks, as mentioned above. Interestingly though, Vietnamese farmers prefer to cooperate with collectors rather than with agricultural enterprises because they find more trust and more conveniences in interacting with collectors.

### **3. Propelling Factors in the Relationship Between the Farmers and Collectors**

#### **3.1. Convenient Transaction Method**

Considering the cooperative relationship between actors in Vietnam's rice supply chain, farmers are more closely related to the collectors than to the milling or food companies due to the advantageous transaction in terms of logistics, price and payment methods.

The collectors offer a convenient transportation method to their partners. While food enterprises face enormous difficulties in transporting products due to unstable capital and lacking variety of resources (human resources, professional experience, and infrastructure, including transportation vehicles, drying machines, and warehouses), the huge number of collectors uses diversified means of transportation and can also handle also drying and milling (Vo, Le and Nguyen, 2015, p. 130). According to a survey of 123 households by Tran and Do (2013) in An Giang, 20.6 per cent of respondents said that enterprises did not buy or delayed buying all rice as contracted at the harvesting time (p. 81) due to the firms' poor storing abilities, so that farmers had to wait to sell their products, potentially affecting the paddy/rice quality. In addition, enterprises' transportation vehicles are normally vans, trucks or lorries, which may not reach the farmers' rice fields. Furthermore, farmers cannot transfer a large amount of paddy/rice to enterprises' warehouses. By contrast, by using local knowledge, collectors are very flexible in transporting agricultural products, allowing them to do business even in rural areas with less developed transport infrastructure. Cao (2010) determined that firms prefer buying paddy/ rice at their stores, while farmers only want to sell it at their fields. This study also found that farmers do not have the means to transport to the firms' stores, while firms cannot afford to buy small-scale products. Importantly,

the collectors can meet the needs of both parties. It is possible that if there were no collectors, enterprises would likely be trapped at the issue of input materials, because they cannot sign contracts directly with farmers since the farmers prefer to sell paddy/rice to collectors (Nguyen and Bach, 2012, p. 66). According to a survey of 100 farmers in An Giang, Bac Lieu and Soc Trang provinces by Vo, Le and Nguyen (2015, p. 129), 76.5 per cent of farmers did not have the means to transport their products, whereas collectors were able to come to their homes or their fields after harvesting, so that farmers would not have to bear the cost of transporting and drying. This is particularly beneficial for farmers in remote areas.

In addition, collectors are very flexible in determining the paddy/rice price, the payment method and also the support methods (if necessary). The status of production and consumption in Vietnam's agricultural sector usually fluctuates, so it is difficult to predict the price before the crop season. Therefore, signing contracts that state a fixed price may cause farmers' that large enterprises may breach the contract (ADB, 2007; Rehber, 2007, p. 107). Meanwhile, in cooperating with collectors, prices are determined at the time of trading under the agreement of both parties, which reduces the risk of price volatility. Additionally, collectors pay by cash as soon as they receive the goods. This helps to solve the farmers' problem of lacking capital of farmers. In contrast, due to the complex procedures related to accounting, food enterprises often pay farmers slowly (Tran and Do, 2013, p. 81), and farmers must go to the head office to receive their payments (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2008). According to a survey by Vo, Le and Nguyen (2015, p. 129), 92 per cent of farmers said selling rice to collectors is easy due to not having to sign a contract. In addition, collectors have a great experience in evaluating the quality of goods and they have good knowledge of farmers' psychology (Nguyen and Bach, 2012, p. 72). Furthermore, some collectors are willing to make a deposit (grants) to farmers to cover the cultivation and harvesting costs, or to buy the less quality products in case of force majeure, whereas, firms usually strictly adhere to the written contract. Thus, it can be said that collectors share the risks with farmers.

In short, contract farming provided by firms sometimes cannot compete with the interests and convenient services that collectors bring to farmers (Roberts and Khiem, 2005), which means that farmers prefer to choose collectors as their partners. However, the above advantages in the transaction are not enough for most farmers to cooperate with collectors, since companies can overcome these issues to better support farmers. Indeed the source of long-term relationships between farmers and collectors lies in socio-cultural factors.

### **3.2. Cultural - Social Induction**

Cultural influences based on historical and religious differences will lead to a variation in cooperative behaviors. In the Western countries, the rational



instrumentalism separates business and social-emotional concerns (Weber, 1930); in contrast, in countries influenced by Confucianism, especial in Vietnam, it is emphasized that cooperation can be combined with affectionate relationships (Martison, Pham and Palacio, 2012, p. 5 citing on Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Further, an important element in a relationship is that the partners must play symmetric roles in creating value (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 2011, p. 21). Hence, farmers and collectors can trade on the basis of promises because they interact in inherent social relationships and they are equal in cooperation.

Usually, collectors and farmers have some sort of relationships, such as locality/dialect, kinship, friendship, acquaintances, or membership in a business association/social club. This is in direct contrast with the relationship between enterprises and farmers, which only see each other as producers or buyers, respectively. The Vietnamese people value personal relationships, which they see as fundamental to supporting a good business. Therefore, farmers feel more familiar and safe in coordinating with collectors. These relationships lead to an initial trust, which supports the decision for farmers to partner with collectors. A close relationship between the two parties allows them to do business without a written contract, which is likely to lead to transaction flexibility, consisting of sympathy for the partner's troubles. For instance, if unfavorable weather conditions mean that the quality of paddy/rice does not meet the standard requirements, the collectors may still be able to buy products but at a lower price. On the other hand, since collectors' activities are affected by milling and food companies, if companies pay late, they may also be in a money shortage and may not be able to pay farmers all at once. In this case, farmers can allow late payments. This is in complete contrast to a written contract with an enterprise that fulfills the principles of the firm but does not offer sympathy to farmers.

The relationship between farmers and collectors is a horizontal relationship with equal cooperation, while farmers and firms are in a vertical relationship.<sup>5</sup> In terms of social status, Vietnamese collectors are farmers doing individual small-scale business per se, they collaborate with farmers, small-scale producers, to share risks and benefits together. Meanwhile, representatives of Vietnamese enterprises, directors or chairmen of the management groups, generally have high positions in society and are powerful. Cooperating with an enterprise means that farmers must deal with an aggregation of employees and a board of directors. Regarding the amount of capital, a collector may have higher financing capacity than a farmer, but this is not significant compared to the assets of a firm. Additionally, there is no legal obligation between farmers and collectors due to their oral engagements, thus, farmers may feel free to negotiate with their partners to get maximal benefits for both parties. In contrast, contracts with enterprises are legally bindings, which

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<sup>5</sup>Explained by Granovetter (2000, p.p.2, 3), "horizontal relationships may involve trust and cooperation, and vertical relationships contain power and compliance".

sometimes hurts farmers since farmers lack bargaining power (Rehber, 2007, p.104), resulting in opportunistic behaviors by enterprises (Cook, Hardin and Levi, 2005, p.40).

As trust is the foundation for cooperation (Walker and Ostrom, 2009, p.117), once credibility has been established, both sides need to enhance trust by reciprocity activities. For the Vietnamese people, such interactions between two individuals may simply involve gossip, not only about business cooperation, but also about health and life status, sharing private meals or making informal visits (Meyer, Tran and Nguyen, 2006). In addition to having familiarity and equality, these simplistic interactions can strengthen relationships between farmers and collectors. As a result, collectors understand what farmers need and desire, and vice versa. These interactions have positive effects on the business of both parties.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, due to power inequalities, there is almost no interaction between the farmers and firms, which leads to weak business links.

### 3.3. Reputation Mechanism

After a period of trading, the trust between farmers and collectors may be consolidated or destroyed, depending on the level of reciprocity of both sides. The collaboration between collectors and farmers is a repeated cooperation until someone betrays the other. Once the trust has been established, its maintenance depends on the success of the business and the reliability of both parties. As mentioned in section 2, the deal between collectors and farmers is not based on legal constraints and may lead to opportunistic behaviour. However, the Vietnam rice business cycle is so small that everyone seems to know each other, leading to the existence of a social net. If a collector abuses the trust, he or she may gain something during the period of deviation, but will destroy potential collusion in later periods (Tirole, 1988, p.246). In addition, in an iterated cooperation, both sides tend to reciprocate with positive reciprocity to the other (Cesarini and Others, 2008, p.3721) due to the effect of tit-for-tat. The collectors understand that betrayal at any time is disadvantageous (Lahno, 1995, p.p.500-505), because no one wants to cooperate with the cheaters. Therefore, keeping farmers' trust is crucial to the survival of collectors, so that they have an incentive to be faithful and maintain their credibility.

Furthermore, a collector and a farmer can establish long-term trust and emotional attachment after some successful transactions (Collet, 2003, p.3). Although economic transactions do not eliminate profit considerations, however, once existing the cohesion, a good familiar collector is always the first choice for the farmer. In fact, even if there is competition among collectors in one area, and each

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<sup>6</sup> Gächter (2006, p.2) argued that people are "conditionally cooperative", if they believe someone does not betray, they will cooperate.

collector can make attractive offers to farmers, such as equipment rental or making loans to engage in cooperation. For farmers choosing a new partner may be risky because they do not know their level of credibility. Thus, instead of taking time to consider a new partner, the farmer will likely still predominantly chooses to cooperate with his former partner. Due to the reputation built on their previous cooperation, the current collectors are likely to be trusted in the future. Furthermore, this relationship can be widened if the farmer helps the collector to build a coalition of partners through the farmer's connections, which is a great benefit to the collector. Thus, reliability and trustworthiness guarantee a higher payoff in the long - run for collectors.

#### **4. Conclusion**

More than 15 years after the implementation of Decision 80 by the Prime Minister to encourage the consumption of agriproducts through contracts, the proportion of contract farming between farmers and enterprises is very modest due to the lack of trust and risk sharing among stakeholders. As a result, most of the paddy/rice is distributed through collectors before making its way to firms. With advantages in logistics and payment methods, collectors are the important link between producers and buyers. Additionally, based on their social connections, collectors know what farmers need and then build trust to achieve long-term cooperations. In reality, the collectors are the intermediary, acquiring information about the production status of farmers and enterprises, so that they act to connect the two actors. Due to the weak link between farmers and firms, collectors are an indispensable force in the rice supply chain in Vietnam.

However, the role of collectors has not been recognized due at least in part to some negative cultural attitudes toward small-scale traders. Recently, collectors have been doing spontaneous business beyond the legal framework, i.e. they can participate in and withdraw from the market without oversight by the government. This leads to collectors potentially engaging in illegal behaviours, including tax evasion and fraud in food safety, which harms the reputation of Vietnamese rice. Therefore, I suggest that collectors need to be acknowledged for their essential role in Vietnam rice production and be forced to register their business. From there, the government can reorganise the collectors to help them access to the government's economic and market management support and policies and to ensure the efficiency of the rice supply chain in Vietnam.

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