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Access, Power and Market Space in Bolivia

Understanding Market Participation and Structural Barriers for Small-Scale Producers

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Abstract

This thesis examines the market access barriers faced by small-scale producers in Bolivia, with a focus on Chiquitania, Los Valles Cruceños, and Zongo. Drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews with producers, vendors, university staff, and institutional actors, it analyses how structural, institutional, and relational barriers shape not only producers' ability to reach markets, but also their ability to benefit from participation in them.

The study finds that poor infrastructure, high transport and input costs, information gaps, weak governance, contraband, and the gatekeeping power of unions, guilds, and intermediaries constrain market access. At the same time, producers are not passive actors; they actively seek to overcome these barriers through collective organisation, engagement with public programmes, partnerships with local authorities, and value-adding strategies.

Using the Market Access Framework, Access Theory, and Institutionalism, the thesis argues that market access should be understood as a relational and institutionally mediated process rather than a purely technical or physical one. It concludes that meaningful inclusion, meaning the ability to benefit from access, requires more than improved connectivity or market linkages; it also depends on transparent governance, stronger regulation, and institutional structures.

Keywords: Market Access, Bolivia, Participation, Structural Barriers, Gatekeepers, Agency

Word count: 14,797

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List of Acronyms

DFID	Department for International Development
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
M4P	Making Markets Work for the Poor
MFA	Market Access Framework
MPI	Market Protecting Institution
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAR	Programa de Alianzas Rurales
SDC	Swiss Development Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WTO	World Trade Organisation

List of Definitions

Economic Development

This study uses a more scaled-down version of Behrman's (2001: 3566) definition of economic development: "[it]is the process through which economies are transformed from ones in which most people have very limited resources and choices to ones in which they have much greater resources and choices". This study changes the definition of 'economies' in a macro sense, with a contexualised definition, highlighting economic transformation of people.

Institutions

his study adopts North's (1990: 3) definition of institutions as "the rules of the game in a society," which include both formal rules (such as laws and regulations) and informal constraints (such as norms, traditions, and social conventions). Informal institutions, in particular, are shaped by and reinforce power relations among actors, determining whose interests are prioritized, who sets the rules, and who is able to access resources and opportunities. Informal institutions include producer organisations and intermediaries. These power dynamics within informal institutions play a critical role in structuring market participation and access.

Intermediaries

The role and definition of intermediaries in this paper aligns with that of Abebe, Bijman and Royer (2016). They define intermediaries as institutions and social networks that facilitate market access for smallholders. Intermediaries in this sense are not only individual traders, but part of a relationship-based mechanism of market access. They are the link between producers and consumers, and are treated as powerful actors in this study.

Market Access

Ribot and Peluso's (2003:153) definition of access is applied, they define access as "the ability to derive benefits from things," rather than simply "the right to benefit from things". Highlighting that participation in markets alone is insufficient.

Value Chain

A value chain refers to the full range of activities and actors involved in bringing a product from its initial conception, through the stages of production, processing, and distribution, to the final consumer. It includes all processes that add value to a product, as well as the relationships, flows of information, and power dynamics among participants (Trienekens, 2011). In this study, value chains are analysed not only in terms of economic transactions, but also with attention to how access, coordination, and governance shape outcomes for smallholders and other actors

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context

Participation in markets has been, and continues to be, a key aspect of economic development, and ensuring inclusive and equal access to markets and the market system is one of the great challenges of economic policy. The World Bank estimates that the African food market could triple in value, reaching USD 1 trillion by 2030 (World Bank, 2013a). Including small and medium-sized agricultural businesses in functional market systems is critical not only for achieving such growth but also for stabilising food prices across regions (World Bank, 2013b; Arias et al., 2013). Through reliable access to domestic and international markets, farmers can secure better prices for their crops and reinvest in their businesses, increasing both output and quality (IFAD, n.d.).

Small-scale producers are widely recognised as central actors in economic development, and numerous studies emphasise that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are crucial drivers of global economic growth (Zada et al., 2022; Rezaei-Moghaddam and Izadi, 2019). They are identified as key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 2: Zero Hunger (EC, 2023). In Bolivia, where informal employment reaches approximately 85%, the highest rate in the world (Aguilera, 2024), the prominence of small-scale producers presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Their contribution to national food production is substantial, yet their ability to participate in and *benefit* from market systems remains restricted.

Shifts in the global economic paradigm have reshaped how markets function. The transition from more cooperative "power-with" systems of shared governance and value distribution toward increasingly centralised, efficiency-driven "power-over" systems has widened the gap between those who control market access and those who depend on it (Kelleci, 2025). This centralisation of economic and financial power has exacerbated inequalities within market systems, leaving small-scale producers particularly vulnerable. Although international development institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF have promoted market access policies, these initiatives often prioritise national integration into global markets rather than addressing the local-level barriers that shape producers' everyday realities. As a result, many smallholders continue to struggle to integrate into formal markets and the broader economic system (World Bank, 2007; Arias et al., 2013).

Research further highlights that analyses of economic inequality frequently overlook sub-national variation, limiting understanding of how market access challenges differ across local contexts (Hochard and Barbier, 2017; Birdsall and Londono, 1997). While market access projects have demonstrated positive effects, such as increased farm income, reduced transaction costs, higher adoption of agricultural inputs, improved yields, and reduced crop loss (Marion and Shisler, 2024), these benefits do not automatically reach producers operating in marginalised or structurally constrained environments. Although debates continue around the merits of "trickle-down" versus "bottom-up" development, recent OECD and UNDP reports emphasise that inclusive, bottom-up growth generates more equitable and sustainable outcomes (UNDP, 2021; OECD, 2020). Yet much of the policy discourse remains focused at semi-local or national levels, without sufficiently addressing the specific barriers faced by producers in distinct localities.

1.2 Aim and Purpose of the Study

Against this backdrop, this thesis examines how small-scale producers in Bolivia access and participate in markets, and how structural, institutional, and organisational barriers shape their ability to do so. Focusing on Chiquitania, Los Valles Cruceños, and Zongo, the study explores how these dynamics differ across local contexts and how they influence producers' engagement with both formal and informal market systems. Rather than viewing market access solely as a matter of entry, the research conceptualises it as a relational process shaped by power, infrastructure, and institutional arrangements.

The study investigates how producers navigate market access and how they overcome the structural barriers associated with it, using qualitative field data from interviews to capture the perceptions of small-scale producers. This allows the study to examine how interconnected barriers shape power relations related to market access and fair participation, contrasting it with mainstream market development theories.

1.3 Research Questions

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. What barriers do small-scale producers in Bolivia face in accessing and participating in markets?
2. How do local market structures and vendor organisations influence producers' ability to access market spaces?
3. How do small-scale producers navigate and attempt to overcome market barriers in practice, and what support do they require to do so effectively?

1.4 Significance of the Study

By highlighting producers' perspectives, the thesis contributes to a more grounded understanding of market inclusion and highlights that producers, intermediaries, and other actors are not a homogeneous group. While market access is widely promoted as a panacea for economic development, projects and theories often prioritise formal market integration, without fully accounting for local contexts and the power relations that shape participation. In this sense, the study provides insight into how market inclusion operates in practice and how this may differ from uniform frameworks and theories of market access.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research problem, outlines the study's aim, purpose and research questions, and situates the topic within the broader context of market access and development. Background on Bolivia's geographical, economic and agricultural context is provided in Chapter 2, with particular attention to the three study regions. The relevant literature on market access, structural and institutional barriers, and the role of power and governance in shaping market participation is reviewed in Chapter 3. The theoretical framework guiding the analysis is presented in Chapter 4, drawing on the Market Access Framework and Access Theory. The methodology, including research design, data collection, positionality, ethical considerations and analytical approach, is outlined in Chapter 5. Findings are presented in Chapter 6 and discussed in Chapter 7. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for future research are offered in Chapter 8.

2. Background

Bolivia's geographical, economic, and agricultural landscape is essential for understanding the market access challenges faced by small-scale producers. The country is characterised by high regional diversity, shaped by dramatic variations in altitude, climate, and infrastructure. These differences influence not only what can be produced in each region but also how producers reach markets, the costs they incur, and the institutional environments they navigate.

2.1 National Context

Bolivia is geographically divided by the Andes mountains, creating three distinct macro-regions: the high-altitude Altiplano, situated at around 4000 metres above sea level; the extensive lowlands to the east, which include savannah, dry forest, and rainforest ecosystems; and the inter-Andean valleys which connect the two. Most of the country's food production originates from the lowlands and the inter-Andean valleys, where the climate is stable and the topography more forgiving, allowing for more intensive agriculture on a larger scale. On the Altiplano, the rainy season starts around October and continues until March, while in the lowlands it extends slightly longer.

2.2 Agricultural Sector

Agriculture employs about 30% of Bolivia's workforce and contributes 13–15% to GDP, primarily from the lowlands and valleys, where Santa Cruz leads in soy, maize, sugar, and beef production (FAO, 2021). Smallholder farms make up the bulk of the agricultural force, with 95% of agricultural units classified as family farming, producing diverse crops such as rice, bananas, and vegetables; however, large estates control much of export-oriented output (Omonte-Ferrufino et al., 2026). They (small-scale farmers) ensure national food security for 75% of rural households, but face barriers like poor infrastructure, price fluctuations, and actors further up the value chain capturing profit. Understanding their market access is crucial, both for inclusive sector-wide growth and sustainable development in Bolivia. Challenges include rising input costs, seasonal infrastructure damage, thus increasing risk for perishable goods, and detrimentally affecting market access.

2.3 Informality

Economically, Bolivia is marked by one of the highest rates of informal employment in the world, with approximately 85% of the labour force working outside the formal sector (Aguilera, 2024). This divide is particularly pronounced between urban and rural areas, where informal agricultural labour dominates. In agriculture, 97% of sector workers hold informal jobs (World Bank, 2021). Small-scale producers account for nearly 98% of national food production (Velarde and Wanderley, 2021), underscoring their critical role in food security and rural livelihoods. Despite this importance, their participation in formal markets remains restricted, shaped by structural, institutional, and logistical constraints that vary across regions.

2.4 Study Regions

To capture the diversity of production environments and market conditions, this study focuses on three distinct regions: **Chiquitania**, **Los Valles Cruceños**, and **Zongo**. These areas differ significantly in geography, infrastructure, climate, and proximity to major markets, offering a broad perspective on the challenges faced by small-scale producers.

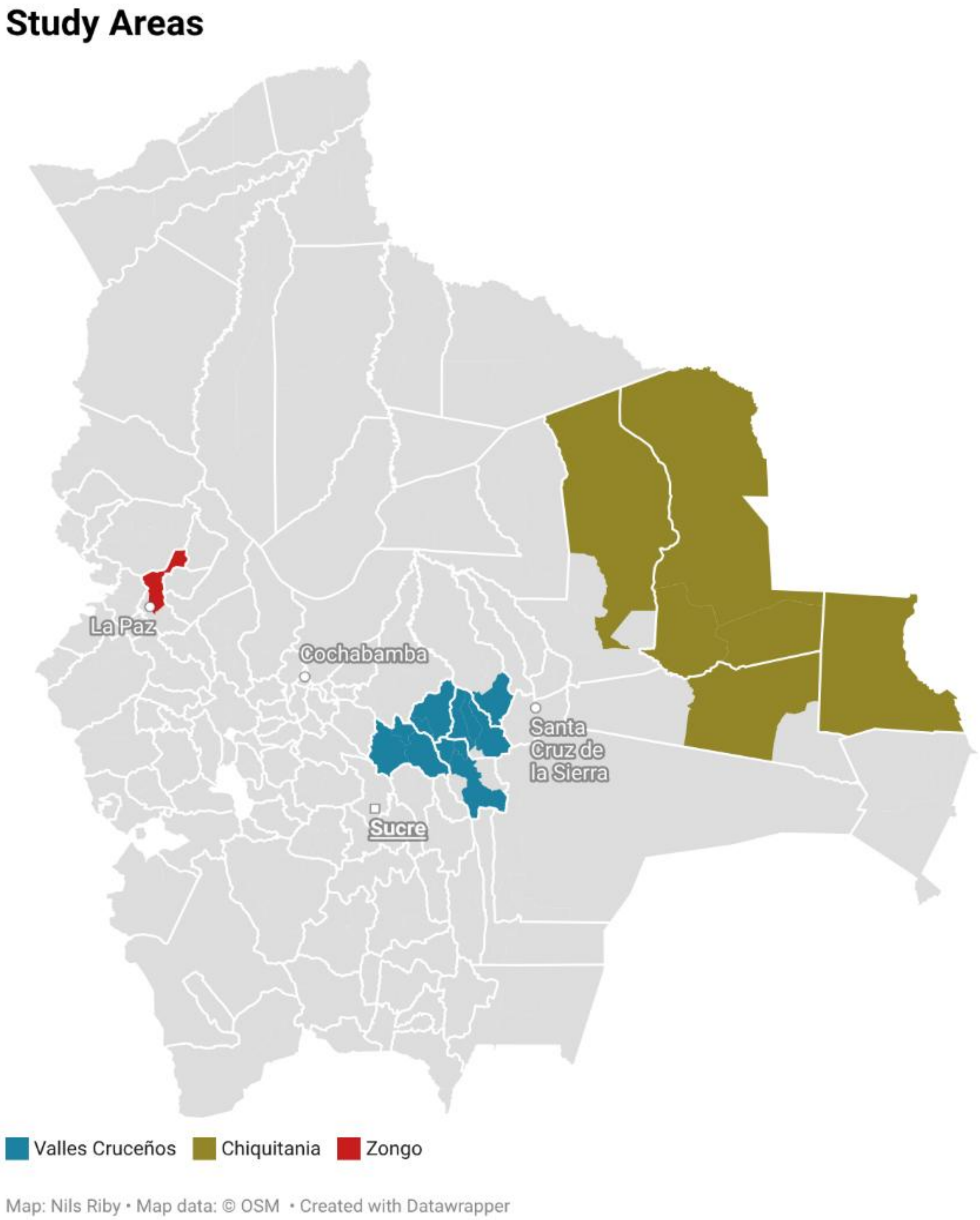

Figure 1, Study Areas in Bolivia.

Chiquitania is an extensive lowland region located in the department of Santa Cruz. It is home to the world's largest intact tropical dry forest and is characterised by low population density and widely dispersed settlements. Infrastructure is limited, with only a few paved roads connecting urban centres to cities. Outside major towns, mobile reception is often unavailable, further restricting access to information and communication. Agriculture and cattle ranching are the primary economic activities, and Santa Cruz city serves as the main market hub. The region's remoteness and infrastructural limitations shape producers' ability to transport goods, access buyers and obtain reliable market information.

Los Valles Cruceños, also located in the department of Santa Cruz, form one of Bolivia's most productive agricultural zones. Situated in the valleys between the Andean plateau and the lowlands, the region benefits from fertile soils and favourable climatic conditions. Settlements and farmland are concentrated along the valley floors, where infrastructure is comparatively more developed than in Chiquitania. However, the region remains vulnerable to landslides and road blockages during periods of heavy rainfall, which can disrupt transport to major markets such as Santa Cruz, Cochabamba and Sucre. These disruptions increase transport costs and risk, particularly for perishable goods.

Zongo is in the department of La Paz and consists of deep tropical valleys that descend from the high Andes toward the Amazon basin. Although geographically close to La Paz, approximately 70 kilometres, the journey requires crossing high-altitude passes of up to 5000 metres and navigating narrow, winding roads. Travel typically takes around four hours, and the region relies on a single road connection that is highly susceptible to weather-related disruptions. Infrastructure is limited, and mobile connectivity is sparse. Agriculture is the main livelihood activity, while La Paz and El Alto are the primary markets. The region's isolation and transport challenges significantly shape producers' market access conditions.

Together, these regions capture a wide range of geographic, infrastructural, and institutional conditions that shape market access for small-scale producers in Bolivia. Their diversity provides a comparative basis for examining if regional characteristics influence producers' opportunities and constraints in accessing markets, or if underlying structural barriers are the key determinant.

3. Literature Review

Market access is a multidimensional concept shaped by structural, institutional, and relational factors. While some strands of literature emphasise physical connectivity and infrastructure, others highlight the institutional arrangements, governance structures, and power relations that determine whether producers can participate in and benefit from markets. For small-scale agricultural producers, market access is rarely reducible to the physical act of reaching a marketplace; it is embedded in social networks, informal norms, political dynamics, and local governance systems. As will be discussed in the literature, market access is better understood as a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a fixed condition, shaped by social relations and informal governance (Granovetter, 1985; Meagher, 2016). This chapter reviews the main bodies of literature relevant to this study: definitions of market access; structural barriers; institutions and governance; market space and local market structures; and market development interventions in Bolivia. The chapter concludes by identifying the research gap that motivates this study.

3.1 Defining Market Access

Market access is defined differently across disciplines, reflecting the diverse contexts in which it is studied. The literature commonly distinguishes between macro-level definitions concerned with international trade and micro-level definitions focused on smallholder participation in local markets. For Bolivia—where most agricultural producers operate within local and regional markets—micro-level definitions are more analytically relevant. Nevertheless, macro-level perspectives help clarify why this study adopts a different conceptual approach.

3.1.1 Macro-level definitions

Macro-level definitions conceptualise market access as the ability of firms or countries to participate in global markets and integrate into international value chains. Institutions such as the OECD emphasise competitiveness, innovation, and the regulatory environment that enables firms to operate internationally. The OECD (2019: 24) highlights how SMEs can "integrate [into] the global economy in different ways, as exporters, suppliers to large firms that export, and importers of competitively priced and higher quality foreign inputs, capital goods and technologies". Infrastructure, particularly large-scale logistics systems, is seen as a key determinant of trade costs and global integration (Bonadio, 2023). Bonadio's (2023) analysis of optimal trade infrastructure shows that port investments generate the greatest spillover effects, a finding of limited relevance for landlocked Bolivia.

These definitions are important in global trade debates but poorly suited to contexts where producers face barriers unrelated to international competitiveness. They also tend to assume that markets are neutral arenas, overlooking the social and institutional dynamics that shape participation.

3.1.2 Micro-level definitions

Micro-level definitions focus on the conditions that enable smallholders to participate in functioning and competitive markets. A widely cited definition is “equal access to competitive and functioning markets” (Barrett, 2008, p. 299). Chamberlain and Jayne (2011) further argue that market access is a multidimensional concept shaped by factors such as infrastructure, transport costs, population density, and the organisation of local market systems, rather than merely physical distance to markets. This perspective emphasises infrastructure, transport costs, access to inputs, and the functioning of local market institutions.

De Janvry and Sadoulet (2001) highlight the importance of infrastructure for labour productivity and access to inputs such as credit, fertilisers, and seeds. In Bolivia, where roughly 30% of the population lives in rural and remote areas, topography and seasonal rains exacerbate existing infrastructure challenges. Transport costs in countries with underdeveloped infrastructure can be up to 70% higher (WTO, 2004), and improvements in transport networks are associated with increased competitiveness and reduced market access costs (Meng et al., 2024).

Value-chain perspectives also contribute to micro-level understandings of market access. Trienekens (2011) proposes the widely Market Access Framework (MFA) for analysing agricultural value chains in developing countries, emphasising how chain structure, governance arrangements, and enabling environments shape producers’ opportunities to participate in markets. While this framework is valuable for identifying and categorising challenges, it pays less attention to the relational and institutional mechanisms that determine whether producers can *benefit* from market participation. This reinforces the need for analytical approaches that incorporate power, access control, and informal governance, and treat it as an interconnected issue.

3.1.3 Why definitions matter

Definitions shape how market access is measured and approached. Barrett (2008) argues that narrow definitions that focus solely on physical access risk demoting institutional and relational factors. Similarly, Fafchamps (2010) emphasises that market access is a web of interrelated constraints, including information, bargaining power, and social networks. These two authors highlight the need for definitions that capture both structural and institutional dimensions.

3.1.4 Limitations of existing definitions

Micro-level definitions are more relevant for this context but often assume that markets are neutral spaces where improved infrastructure or information automatically improve outcomes. These definitions overlook how markets are embedded in social, political, and institutional contexts, where power relations and informal governance shape who can participate and on what terms (Meagher, 2016; Hickey and du Toit, 2007). Access Theory is particularly useful here: Ribot and Peluso (2003: 153) define access as “the ability to derive benefits from things,” rather than simply “the right to benefit from things”. Their distinction underscores why definitions centred on physical participation alone fall short, and, in turn, motivates the use of Access Theory and institutional perspectives in this study.

3.2 Structural Barriers to Market Access

Structural barriers remain a widely studied dimension of market access. These include infrastructure, geography, transaction costs, and information asymmetry. While these factors are undeniably important, they only partially explain market access dynamics, particularly in contexts where institutional and relational factors shape producers’ ability to benefit from markets.

3.2.1 Infrastructure and geography

Infrastructure is consistently identified as a key determinant of market access (Meng et al., 2024). Poor roads, long distances, and challenging topography increase transport costs, reduce the predictability of market visits, and limit producers’ ability to safely sell perishable goods. Bolivia’s mountains, valleys, and seasonal rains create significant logistical challenges. Seasonal rains can trigger landslides, rendering rural roads impassable for days, forcing producers to delay market visits.

Stifel and Minten (2008) provide evidence that geographic isolation reduces agricultural productivity and depresses farm-gate prices. This is supported by Escobal and Ponce (2002), who found that improved rural roads in similar Andean contexts in Ecuador and Peru increased market participation and reduced dependence on intermediaries.

3.2.2 Transaction costs

Transaction costs, including transport, negotiation, and enforcement costs, are central to understanding market access. Fafchamps (2004) argues that high transaction costs disproportionately affect smallholders, as their small-scale endeavours prevent them from dealing in bulk. In Bolivia, producers frequently rely on intermediaries, but this reliance can also reduce their bargaining power and share of final market prices.

Risk and uncertainty further increase transaction costs. Producers face uncertainty regarding prices, demand, and input costs, which can discourage market participation.

3.2.3 Information asymmetry

Information asymmetry, particularly regarding prices and demand, further hinders market access. Producers lacking reliable market information are more vulnerable to exploitation by intermediaries, see also Aker (2010), Jensen (2007), and Fafchamps (2004). Mobile phones and digital platforms have improved information flows in some contexts; however, their impact in rural Bolivia remains uneven due to poor network coverage (Omar et al., 2025).

3.2.4 Critique of structural approaches

Although structural barriers are important, studies focusing solely on these factors often fail to acknowledge the power relations and institutional dynamics that shape market access. Assuming that markets are neutral spaces, and that improvements in infrastructure or information automatically translate into improved outcomes, sidelines and overlooks how markets are embedded in social, political, and institutional contexts.

Bebbington (1999) criticises this neutrality and shows how access to resources is mediated by social and political relations. Hickey and du Toit (2007) argue that poor people are often poorly incorporated into markets. Meagher (2016) demonstrates that informal economies are governed by power relations and that webs of power are highly interconnected. Scoones (2015) and Cleaver (2012) highlight how livelihoods and institutional bricolage shape access in ways that cannot be captured by structural variables alone.

Access Theory reinforces these critiques by emphasising that access is mediated by mechanisms such as authority, social identity, and capital (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). These mechanisms shape who can benefit from market participation, even when structural barriers are reduced. Thus, infrastructure-focused analyses alone cannot fully explain variations in market participation.

3.3 Institutions and Governance

Both formal and informal institutions are key in shaping market access. They determine who can participate in markets, under what conditions, and with what benefits.

3.3.1 Formal institutions

Formal institutions include national governments, trade agreements, legal frameworks, and regulatory bodies. In international trade, institutions such as the WTO and GATT influence transaction costs, contract enforcement, and predictability (Evenett and Hoekman, 2004). Johnson, Souva, and Smith (2013) argue that shortcomings in trade effectiveness lie in states' failure to enforce market-protecting institutions (MPIs). Weak MPIs increase transaction costs by creating uncertainty about contract enforcement, enabling customs officials or intermediaries to circumvent legal frameworks (Anderson and Marcouiller, 2002). In addition to weak enforcement, poorly designed administration can generate significant burdens, with institutional "sludge" adding avoidable transaction costs for small-scale producers (Shabab and Lades, 2021).

At the local level, formal institutions include municipal governments, market administrators, and regulatory systems. In Bolivia, municipal governments allocate market stalls and regulate market operations. However, limited institutional capacity and influential external actors frequently undermine formal governance.

3.3.2 Local governance

Decentralised governance is argued to be more responsive to local needs, especially in contexts with geographic and socio-economic conditions that differ from those of the central national authority. Local governments can better identify informal power relations, social networks, and market-specific challenges (Carlsson and Sandström, 2008). However, decentralisation does not guarantee equitable governance. Local institutions may reproduce existing power structures or fail to regulate intermediaries meaningfully.

In Bolivia, alliances between municipal officials and market unions have shaped decisions about stall allocation and rule enforcement (Laserna, 2011; Farthing and Kohl, 2014). Farthing and Kohl (2014) show that during the Morales era, unions and social movements became central actors in regulating access to what were supposed to be public market spaces.

3.3.3 Informal institutions

Informal institutions, including cooperatives and social networks, are central in shaping market access. Helmke and Levitsky (2004: 727) define informal institutions as "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels". Their categorisation helps explain how local norms and intermediary practices interact with formal regulations.

Laserna (2011) argues that informal institutions in Bolivia frequently wield greater power and agency than formal governance. Cooperatives have significant potential to improve market access by reducing input costs, increasing access to information, and enhancing bargaining power (Permadi and Winarti, 2025; Aku et al., 2018). They also act as a buffer for producers during economic shocks, as the effects are spread (UN, 2009); however, their effectiveness depends on leadership, inclusive participation, and tangible results (Anina and Towo, 2016).

Historical institutionalism suggests that institutional arrangements tend to reproduce existing power relations, making structural change gradual and often resistant to reform (Pierson, 2000).

Lyon (2000) shows that trust and social networks are essential mechanisms for enforcing agreements in contexts with weak formal institutions. Chalfin (2010) similarly demonstrates how informal regulation shapes trade. When weak formal institutions fail to enforce MPIs, informal institutions shape power dynamics and resource access.

3.3.4 Power, access, and exclusion

Power is not an add-on to institutions; it is fundamental to how they operate. Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of access emphasises that access is mediated by social identity, authority and capital.

Sikor and Lund (2009) show how claims to authority and property shape who can legitimately access resources and spaces. Lindell (2010) and Meagher (2018) document how informal governance arrangements structure who can trade, where, and under what conditions. In Bolivian markets, intermediaries, unions, and local authorities often exercise control over who can sell and on what terms. These dynamics shape producers' ability to benefit from market participation, even when physical access is available.

3.4 Market Space and Local Market Structures

Market space is an underexplored dimension of market access. While there is extensive literature on informal markets and street vending, few studies examine physical market spaces as determinants of access for small-scale producers.

Market space has evolved alongside urbanisation: as populations have centralised, so too have markets (Maphosa, 2025). This centralisation has increased the importance of intermediaries, who often visit producers directly, blurring the boundary between farm-gate transactions and market-based sales (Abebe, Bijman and Royer, 2016).

For this study, market space refers primarily to municipal markets and other formally regulated spaces in regional hubs. These differ significantly from informal street vending, where vendors may rely on bribery or political patronage to avoid harassment (Maphosa, 2025). Studies from Zambia and Zimbabwe show how informal vendors have been targeted through forced relocations (Tibaijuka, 2005; Transberg-Hansen, 2004). Roever (2020) examines how street vendors navigate these informal and uncertain spaces and argues that informal markets are always regulated, but that the way in which access is shaped varies.

Access Theory is important for understanding these dynamics. Control over market space is a form of access control: unions, municipal authorities, and established vendors can mediate or restrict others' ability to benefit from market participation. These actors exercise authority, regulate information flows, and shape the terms of market access and transactions. Thus, market space is not simply a physical location but a socially and institutionally governed space in which access is not a certainty.

3.5 Market Development Projects in Bolivia

Market development projects in Bolivia, such as those implemented by Sida and Swisscontact, aim to promote inclusive markets and strengthen agricultural value chains (Swisscontact, n.d.). Many of these projects are influenced by broader value-chains and "making markets work for the poor" (M4P) approaches, which emphasise improving market efficiency, addressing chain-level constraints, and linking producers to buyers (DFID, 2008; Springfield Centre, 2015). This approach grounds several major programmes in Bolivia. The *Programa de Alianzas Rurales* (PAR) has been one of the most influential initiatives, promoting "productive alliances" that link smallholders with buyers and co-finance investments in market-oriented production (World Bank, 2011). Similarly, the ACCESOS programme has focused on rural market access, productive inclusion, and improving local infrastructure to improve regional market access (World Bank, 2015). Mercados Inclusivos, implemented by Swisscontact, Sida and the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), applies an M4P approach to strengthen agricultural value chains and promote inclusive market systems (Swisscontact, 2021). These interventions target many areas of market inclusion, IFAD's *Procamélidos* programme has supported producer organisations and market access for camelid producers in the Altiplano (IFAD, 2019).

While these projects have improved productivity and facilitated market connections, they highlight value-chain and M4P assumptions that focus on efficiency and physical access while ignoring the relational and institutional barriers that prevent producers from benefiting from market participation. As a result, interventions may ignore the local power relations and informal governance structures that control market spaces, which determine whether producers can derive benefits from market participation.

3.6 Research Gap

Although there is extensive literature on market access, institutions, and agricultural development, studies examining market access from the perspective of producers themselves are lacking. Most research focuses on infrastructure, access to capital, or the effects of interventions, often overlooking the relational and institutional dynamics that shape physical market access. The literature also seems to treat market barriers as individual phenomena, as conditions that themselves would not drastically hinder access. However, phenomena such as geography, input price fluctuations, and dependence on intermediaries shape producers' opportunities and vulnerabilities.

While studies such as Abebe, Bijman, and Royer (2016) and Roever (2020) examine intermediaries and market structures, they do not analyse access as a question of power, control, and institutional mediation. They also fail to consider how these interconnected constraints are mutually reinforcing, creating intersectional challenges for producers' market access and equal participation.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by applying Access Theory to local agricultural market structures in Bolivia and by analysing market access from the perspective of producers themselves. It focuses on how structural conditions, institutional arrangements, and power relations shape producers' ability not only to reach markets, but to benefit from participating in them. It also highlights how these constraints intersect and reinforce one another in everyday practice.

4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks used to analyse market access in this study. While there are a plethora of ways to examine market participation, governance, and institutional dynamics, this study will apply a combination of the MFA, Access Theory, and selected insights from. Together, these perspectives provide a lens for identifying and understanding the structural, institutional, and relational structures that traditional theories and frameworks fail to do. The combined framework is applicable in contexts where structural constraints, institutional arrangements, and power relations intersect to shape producers' experiences of market access.

4.1 Market Access Framework

Trienekens' (2011) analysis of agricultural value chains in developing countries highlights how chain structure and governance arrangements shape producers' opportunities to participate in markets. MFA conceptualises market participation as the outcome of structural and institutional conditions that determine whether trade is profitable.

MFA emphasises how transportation systems, information flows, and institutional arrangements shape transaction costs, and are not static. These include the effort required to transport goods, obtain information, negotiate prices, or enforce agreements. High transaction costs disproportionately affect smallholders, who often lack the scale or resources to mitigate them (Fafchamps, 2004). Infrastructure, particularly roads and transport networks, is therefore a critical determinant of participation according to MFA. Stifel and Minten (2008) show that geographic isolation reduces farm-gate prices and, in turn, limits integration into regional markets.

Thus, MFA provides a strong foundation for categorising and understanding the structural conditions that shape how producers can participate in markets. However, it lacks the theoretical depth to explain whether producers can benefit from participation, or how power, institutions, and relational dependencies shape those benefits. These gaps are addressed by Access Theory.

4.2 Access Theory

Access Theory complements MFA by changing what access means, from ability to participate to ability to derive benefits (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). This distinction of access helps understand and examine contexts where formal rights (such as the right to participate in the market) exist but are mediated by social relations, institutional arrangements, and power dynamics. Participating alone is not access; meaningfully benefiting, however, is access.

Access Theory identifies a range of mechanisms, mainly social and institutional, through which actors gain, maintain, or lose access. These mechanisms are interconnected: access to capital may depend on social relations, while access to markets may depend on relationships with intermediaries or local authorities. Access to capital may be limited due to a lack of social relations, which is exacerbated by the rurality of producers. These constraints do not operate independently; they reinforce one another and shape producers' ability to benefit from market participation, highlighting their interconnectedness.

A central concept in Access Theory is access control, defined as the ability of certain actors to mediate or restrict others' access (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Intermediaries, unions, and local authorities often control access to market spaces, information, and customers. Producers must therefore navigate these power structures to benefit from market participation. Access control is dynamic, negotiated, and reproduced through everyday interaction, highlighting how difficult it is to gain market access.

Access Theory also emphasises the relational nature of access. Access is not possessed independently; it is shaped by individuals' position within social networks, institutional structures, and power relations. This relational perspective is relevant for understanding market access in Bolivia, where producers' ability to benefit from markets depends on their relationships with those who control the market spaces. In this sense, the relational nature of access theory has some overlaps with Sen's (1983) entitlement theory.

By integrating these insights, Access Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the mechanisms through which producers' ability to benefit from market participation is shaped. It complements MFA's structural focus by highlighting power, relationships, and institutional mediation.

4.3 Institutionalism

Institutionalism provides support for understanding how formal and informal rules shape behaviour. North (1990: 3) defines "institutions as 'the rules of the game'" while Helmke and Levitsky (2004) distinguish between formal institutions (laws, regulations) and informal institutions (norms, networks, unwritten rules). There is plenty of literature on institutions and economic performance, and how strong institutions are key for economic growth (see Acemoglu and Johnson, 2004; Knack and Keefer, 1995).

Historical institutionalism emphasises how past institutional arrangements still shape present-day governance through path dependence. In Bolivia, market access is still shaped by historical patterns of decentralisation, union influence, and informal governance. Informal institutions can serve as substitutes for formal governance (Laserna, 2011), with unions and guilds regulating access to market spaces, enforcing norms, and sometimes settling disputes. Farthing and Kohl (2014) show that during the President Morales era, these actors became central to local governance, shaping access to public resources and economic opportunities.

Institutionalism, therefore, complements MFA and Access Theory by highlighting how rules, both written and unwritten, structure market access and shape power relations and interactions between producers, intermediaries, and local authorities.

4.4 Operational Definition of Market Access

Drawing on the Market Access Framework, Access Theory (Ribot and Peluso, 2003), and institutionalist perspectives on formal and informal rules (North, 1990; Helmke and Levitsky, 2004), this study defines market access as:

> *The ability of producers to benefit from participating in market exchange, shaped by structural conditions (infrastructure, geography), institutional arrangements (formal and informal rules), and power relations (control of market space, intermediary dominance, and relational dependencies)*

This operational definition integrates MFA's focus on participation with Access Theory's emphasis on benefits and institutionalism's attention to rules and governance.

4.5 Analytical Implications

The combined framework has several implications for the analysis:

Market access is relational, not merely physical.

- Producers' ability to benefit depends on their position within social and institutional networks.

Institutions—formal and informal—shape access.

- Local governance structures, unions, and intermediaries mediate access to market spaces.

Power matters.

- Access control is central to understanding why some producers benefit while others do not.

Constraints are interconnected.

- Structural, institutional, and relational barriers reinforce one another, shaping uneven opportunities and outcomes.

5. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to investigate small-scale producers' access to markets in Bolivia. It presents the research design, data collection strategy, sampling approach, analytical procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study. The aim is to ensure transparency in how the research was conducted and to critically reflect on methodological choices and the researcher's positionality.

5.1 Research Design

This study adopts an intrinsic qualitative case study design, aiming to develop an in-depth understanding of small-scale producers' experiences of market access in Bolivia. The focus is on contextual depth rather than statistical generalisation.

Qualitative methods are particularly suited for capturing lived experiences and meanings. As Punch (2005: 149) notes, qualitative research enables access to the perspectives of local actors "from the inside". A case study approach is appropriate because it allows for detailed analysis of complex phenomena embedded in real-world contexts (Punch, 2005: 144).

A flexible research design was used throughout the study to accommodate the variability of field conditions. This allowed interview questions to be adapted to local contexts and participant backgrounds, and enabled the incorporation of unforeseen empirical insights during fieldwork (Anastas, 1999). This flexibility was essential given the geographical dispersion and infrastructural limitations of the research sites.

The study is also informed by feminist methodological principles, particularly in relation to reducing hierarchical dynamics between researcher and participant and prioritising participant voice in knowledge production (Bell, 2014).

5.2 Data Collection

5.2.1 Method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with a total of 15 interviews conducted. 15 interviews were conducted as it was deemed sufficient for data saturation. The interview guide consisted primarily of open-ended questions, supplemented by focused follow-up questions to explore specific aspects of market access (see Appendix A and B). This method allowed for consistency across key themes while maintaining flexibility to explore participant-led narratives in depth. Semi-structured interviews were therefore appropriate for this exploratory, context-sensitive study.

This approach aligns with qualitative feminist methodologies, which emphasise dialogue over rigid structure and allow participants greater influence over the direction of the interview. Robson and

McCartan (2016) highlight that semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable because they enable follow-up questions and responsive engagement.

5.2.2 Field Access and Research Position

There was no formal host organisation for the study. However, field access was facilitated through collaboration with four organisations:

- Swisscontact
- Proinpa
- Conservation International
- Embassy of Sweden in La Paz

These organisations provided logistical support for access to remote areas but did not influence the research design, data collection, or analysis.

Positionality

A key reflexive consideration relates to the researcher's positionality in the field. In several instances, the researcher was introduced locally as being affiliated with the Swedish Embassy, despite conducting the fieldwork in a private capacity. This could have had implications for how the researcher was perceived by participants, potentially influencing levels of trust, expectation, or perceived institutional authority.

This highlights the importance of acknowledging how perceived institutional association can shape field interactions, even when not formally accurate, and reflects broader concerns in qualitative research regarding researcher identity and power dynamics.

5.2.3 Sampling Strategy

A pragmatic combination of maximum variation sampling and convenience sampling was used. This enabled inclusion of participants across different geographical areas, occupations, and institutional roles while remaining responsive to field realities (Patton, 2007).

Across the three regions, interviews were conducted with a diverse group of participants whose livelihoods intersect with agricultural production and market systems. While agriculturalists formed the bulk of respondents, the sample also included honey producers, agro-input vendors, university staff, and municipal officials.

Participant selection was primarily based on willingness and availability, reflecting the practical constraints of conducting fieldwork in remote areas with limited accessibility. Although the study aimed to include variation in age, gender, and professional background, these characteristics were not applied as strict sampling criteria.

Participants were accessed during field visits facilitated by organisations working in the respective regions. Interviews were conducted between November 2025 and February 2026.

5.2.4 Interview Process

The open-ended questions were intentionally non-leading to reduce researcher bias (Punch, 2005; Robson and McCartan, 2016).

A feminist research approach informed the interview process, emphasising participant-led dialogue and reducing asymmetries of power. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, were audio-recorded, and participants were guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time (Schaefer and Wertheimer, 2010).

5.3 Language and Transcription

All interviews were conducted in Spanish to ensure accessibility and participant comfort. Although the researcher is fluent in Spanish, it is not the first language. This may have occasionally affected nuance in communication and interpretation. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy in analysis.

5.4 Data Analysis

The process of analysing the data was organised in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006: 87) six-phase framework for thematic analysis: 1. familiarising yourself with the data; 2. generating initial codes; 3. searching for themes; 4. reviewing themes; 5. defining and naming themes; and 6. producing the report. This framework provided a systematic structure for identifying and interpreting patterns across the interview data.

The analysis was further informed by Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach to qualitative data analysis, particularly their emphasis on data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This supported a structured organisation of the large volume of interview material and ensured that analytical steps remained transparent and traceable.

The data was first analysed through an inductive thematic coding process in NVivo 15. This approach allowed themes to emerge directly from the data without being constrained by pre-existing theoretical categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Inductive coding was particularly important in this study given its exploratory nature and the aim of capturing participants' own descriptions of market access barriers in their local contexts. This ensured that the analysis remained grounded in empirical reality rather than imposed assumptions.

Following the inductive phase, a second round of deductive coding was conducted. In this phase, the initial codes and emerging themes were revisited and refined in relation to relevant theoretical perspectives and analytical categories. This iterative process allowed for deeper analytical consistency and ensured that the findings were not only descriptive but also conceptually informed (Cresswell, 2014). In practice, this involved re-examining interview transcripts to identify additional supporting evidence for emerging themes and clarifying overlaps or inconsistencies between codes.

Throughout the process, coding and theme development were iterative rather than linear, with movement between data, codes, and emerging interpretations. This reflects the flexible and interpretive nature of qualitative thematic analysis as described by Robson and McCartan (2016), where analysis evolves alongside increasing familiarity with the data.

Once coding was completed and key themes had been identified, the data was interpreted through the analytical lenses of Access Theory, MFA and Institutionalism. This step enabled a deeper understanding of how structural, institutional, and logistical factors interact to shape market participation. The use of these frameworks provided a structured way of linking empirical findings to broader discussions of market access and inequality.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

This study follows the principle of "do no harm" (Becker, Bryman and Ferguson, 2012: 58). Ethical considerations were central throughout the research process, particularly given the field-based nature of the study and the involvement of small-scale producers in remote rural areas.

Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and all data was anonymised.

Ethical design was informed by Punch (2005) and Chambers (1981), particularly in relation to common fieldwork biases. These include spatial bias (over-representation of accessible areas), project bias (sampling influenced by development interventions), elite bias (over-representation of easily accessible participants), and gender bias (under-representation of women). These risks were actively considered during fieldwork design and participant selection.

Reflexivity was further informed by Scheyvens (2014), with particular attention to ensuring that research practices remained context-sensitive and ethically grounded. Sultana (2007) informed considerations of positionality and power, especially in relation to uneven researcher–participant relationships in field settings. Finally, Kapoor's (2004) critique of Western research in non-Western contexts informed a broader reflexive stance, particularly regarding the risk of reproducing asymmetrical knowledge production dynamics.

5.6 Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study is its multi-sited design across three geographically and infrastructurally diverse regions of Bolivia. This enables comparative insight into how market access barriers vary across contexts rather than treating rural producers as homogeneous. The inclusion of diverse actor groups (producers, vendors, institutional actors) also strengthens the study by providing a more systemic understanding of market structures.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, participant access through development organisations may introduce elements of project bias (Chambers, 1981), although efforts were made to mitigate this through institutional diversity.

Second, while the researcher is fluent in Spanish, it is not the native language. This may have affected subtle aspects of communication and interpretation. A further limitation is that certain expressions, idioms, or culturally embedded meanings may not translate precisely into English during transcription and analysis. This introduces a potential risk of partial meaning loss or simplification in translation, which is an inherent challenge in cross-linguistic qualitative research.

Finally, the sample size (15 interviews) limits statistical generalisability. However, the study prioritises analytical transferability, aiming to generate insights that may be relevant to similar contexts rather than representative claims.

6. Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, organised according to the three research questions guiding the analysis: **(1)** the barriers that producers face in accessing markets, **(2)** the ways in which market structures and organisational actors shape this access, and **(3)** the strategies producers employ in response, alongside the forms of support they consider necessary. The findings are based on semi-structured interviews conducted with producers, agro input vendors, honey producers, university staff, and municipal officials in Chiquitania, Valles Cruceños, and Zongo. The findings highlight the experiences of production challenges, a lack of institutional capacity, and dysfunctional market systems. Throughout the interviews, participants described that structural barriers, governance dynamics, and power relations shape their opportunities to commercialise agricultural products. They also emphasised several strategies to overcome said barriers and what support they need to enact their strategies. The sections that follow present these findings in a descriptive manner, underlining participants' accounts, without interpreting or analysing, which will be done in Chapter 7.

6.1 Barriers to Market Access

6.1.1 Structural and Institutional Barriers

Participants described a range of structural and institutional barriers that shape their ability to access markets. These barriers were often experienced as systemic, persistent, and beyond the control of individual producers. Three main issues emerge: the impact of contraband, the role of local and national governance, and the influence of unions and guilds.

Contraband agricultural products entering Bolivia from neighbouring countries were identified as a major source of unfair competition. Producers explained that smuggled goods are not taxed, allowing them to be sold at significantly lower prices. This creates a market environment in which local producers struggle to compete. This is exacerbated due to the continuous rise of their own production costs. One participant, who also owns an agricultural inputs store, described the situation

> *Illegal goods are of poor quality, adulterated, and very cheap, that's one of the things that really destroys us: the issue of informality* (Interviewee 7).

Producers emphasised that contraband affects both the sale of produce and the market for agricultural inputs. Sudden drops in prices caused by the influx of smuggled goods make it difficult to recover production and transport costs. As one producer explained

> *When someone smuggles something in, that box [of tomatoes] can cost 30 bolivianos [at the market], and if your freight costs you 20 pesos, you have 10* (Interviewee 4).

These accounts illustrate how contraband undermines price stability and contributes to a sense of vulnerability among producers who feel they are competing in an uneven playing field.

Local governance structures were frequently described as inconsistent, politicised, and lacking transparency. Municipal governments are responsible for allocating market spaces, yet producers reported that these processes often depend on personal connections or informal arrangements. A participant described being denied access to market stalls without explanation, expressing frustration with the lack of accountability, stating that

> *Talking to the person in charge at the mayor's office is pointless, the market administrator, that guy is just passing through* (Interviewee 1).

This suggests that local governance practices contribute to uncertainty and limit producers' ability to plan for market participation. The absence of transparent procedures for market space allocation reinforces perceptions of exclusion, particularly among producers who are not affiliated with influential groups.

At the national level, producers described a lack of coordinated strategies to help guide agricultural production. Participants noted that government initiatives often focus on urban centres, leaving rural producers with limited institutional engagement. Weak enforcement of ecological and organic labelling standards was seen as undermining the efforts of producers who invest in sustainable practices.

> *We don't see practically any government strategy, they are focused on the big cities. So far, nothing has happened* (Interviewee 4).

> *There are no laboratories here, there are not, it cannot be supervised, it cannot be controlled or regulated* (Interviewee 1).

Producers also highlighted the lack of incentives for transitioning to ecological production, despite growing consumer interest. The lack of institutional support contributes to a sense of isolation among producers who feel that their efforts to improve production quality are not recognised or rewarded within the broader policy environment.

Unions and guilds were described as powerful actors that exert significant control over access to market spaces, particularly in major cities. Participants reported that these organisations determine who can sell in formal markets, often excluding independent producers or those without established connections.

> *The markets are politically co-opted by the guilds* (Interviewee 1).

> *Unions have taken over the markets, preventing producers from selling their own produce* (Interviewee 4).

Producers described union leaders as holding considerable authority, with decisions about market access often depending on their approval. These power dynamics create a system in which producers' ability to participate in markets is mediated by actors who have their own agenda of financial profit. The influence of unions and guilds reinforces existing inequalities and limits opportunities for producers seeking to sell directly to consumers.

6.1.2 Production-Related Barriers

In addition to structural and institutional challenges, producers described several production-related barriers that directly affect their capacity to cultivate and bring products to market. These barriers were experienced as increasingly severe in recent years, with rising costs and labour shortages placing significant pressure on already narrow margins.

Participants consistently emphasised the rapid increase in the cost of agricultural inputs. Seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides were described as substantially more expensive than in previous years, with producers struggling to keep pace with these rising expenses. One producer illustrated this trend by noting:

> *A packet of seeds used to cost 1500 bolivianos, now it's over 5000 bolivianos* (Interviewee 4).

Such increases were not limited to a single input but were described as affecting the entire production process. Another participant summarised the situation by stating that:

> *Seeds, fertilizer, pesticides—extremely expensive* (Interviewee 10).

These rising costs reduce producers' ability to invest in their crops, limit the scale of production, and increase financial vulnerability. Several participants explained that they were forced to make difficult decisions about which inputs to purchase, often compromising on quality or quantity. This, in turn, affects yields and the consistency of supply, further constraining their ability to compete in markets dominated by intermediaries and contraband goods.

Labour was described as a significant challenge. Producers explained that finding workers has become increasingly difficult, and wages are often higher than what producers can sustainably pay. The costs of renting a tractor have more than doubled, one participant emphasised the severity of the issue, stating that

> *Labour costs are a problem too, it's a very, very, very serious problem. It's scarce, it's inadequate, and it's expensive. Besides that, there's the food and the coca. You also have to pay for round-trip transportation. So, 150 per hour for that every day* (Interviewee 7).

Labour costs include all that the labourer could need for the day, including transport, food, drink and coca leaves (to chew). This shows that rising labour costs add substantial pressure to production budgets, especially when combined with the increasing price of inputs. Producers highlighted that the cost of hiring workers for planting, harvesting, and transporting products has grown to the point where it directly affects profitability. Participants consistently emphasised the financial burden associated with hiring workers and the difficulty of covering these expenses within already tight margins.

6.1.3 Market System Barriers

Participants described a range of barriers embedded within the market system itself. These barriers shape how producers interact with markets, influence the prices they receive, and determine the extent to which they can participate in formal selling spaces.

Intermediaries were widely identified as central actors in the market system, often controlling access to buyers and setting prices. Producers described complete dependence on intermediaries, who frequently purchase products at low prices and resell them at significantly higher margins.

> *The intermediaries lower the price… the intermediary puts it in a different size and lighter container and gives it to the supermarket* (Interviewee 2).

Another noted that intermediaries often misrepresent market prices, stating that:

> *He tells you it's listed at 80, but he will sell it at 150* (Interviewee 4).

These accounts highlight the asymmetrical power relations between producers and intermediaries. Producers lack alternative channels for selling their products, leaving them with little bargaining power. This dependence reinforces low farm-gate prices, contributes to financial insecurity, and reinforces the financial capital asymmetry between producers and intermediaries.

Access to formal market spaces was described as limited and tightly controlled. Producers reported that gaining access to a stall in urban markets is not possible unless they have connections to unions or guilds.

> *We can't sell directly from the producer to the consumer because they won't give us the space* (Interviewee 10).

> *In Saipina there was an initiative, and I think they have done so, [the municipality tried] to buy a space in the market in Cochabamba so that the products of the valleys can also reach there directly from the producer to the consumer* (Interviewee 2).

Another emphasised the need for more inclusive selling opportunities:

> *We need to open free markets in Santa Cruz and Cochabamba* (Interviewee 3).

Restricted access to market spaces exacerbates producers' dependence on intermediaries, limiting their ability to earn what they deserve and build relationships with consumers.

Transport challenges further constrain market participation. Producers in Valles Cruceños and Zongo described reliance on a single road that is vulnerable to landslides and weather-related disruptions.

> *The roads can sometimes be impassable, and the entire crop can be lost if it keeps raining* (Interviewee 3).

Rising fuel prices exacerbate these challenges, with the same participant explaining that:

> *[…] the price of fuel has gone up 200%... transportation has gone up as well* (Interviewee 7).

Transport difficulties increase the cost and risk of bringing products to market, particularly for agricultural produce. These challenges also limit producers' ability to reach more distant markets where prices may be higher or access is less limited.

Participants described limited access to reliable price information, making it difficult for them to negotiate with intermediaries or plan future production. Delayed payments were also reported, contributing to financial instability. Producers explained that they often receive payment days or weeks after delivering their products, sometimes leaving them without the financial means to cover daily expenses. This information and payment challenges reinforce producers' vulnerable position within the value chain.

6.2 Market Structures, Power Relations, and Access Control

The second research question examines how market structures and organisational actors shape producers' access to markets. Participants described how access is mediated by unions, guilds, intermediaries, and governance institutions. These actors were perceived as holding influence over who can participate in markets, under what conditions, and at what price. The findings highlight how power is distributed within the market system and how this distribution of power affects producers' opportunities to sell their products.

6.2.1 Gatekeeping by Unions, Guilds, and Intermediaries

Participants consistently described unions and guilds as powerful gatekeepers that regulate access to formal market spaces. These organisations were portrayed as having significant authority over who is allowed to sell in urban markets, often prioritising those with which they have relationships with or other established networks. Producers without connections to these groups reported facing substantial barriers when attempting to access market spaces. One participant emphasised the extent to which these organisations shape market participation.

> *The markets are politically co-opted by the guilds* (Interviewee 1).

Another producer described how unions actively prevent independent producers from accessing market stalls, stating that

> *Unions have taken over the markets, preventing producers from selling their own produce* (Interviewee 4)

These accounts suggest that unions and guilds act as gatekeeping institutions, reinforcing existing hierarchies within the market system. Their influence directly limits opportunities for producers who want to sell directly to consumers, and contributes to the continued reliance on intermediaries for market access.

Intermediaries themselves were also described as powerful actors who control access to buyers and influence price formation. Participants explained that intermediaries often purchase products at low prices and resell them at significantly higher margins, shaping the distribution of value within the market system.

> *They do not take any of the risk, but they get to sell it for much more than us* (Interviewee 2).

> *Intermediaries get all the money without doing anything, only going from here[the producers] to the market* (Interviewee 4).

This highlights producers' perception that intermediaries capture a disproportionate share of value while not being transparent regarding pricing. Participants did not describe the specific contractual conditions under which intermediaries purchase products, but they consistently emphasised that intermediaries influence the prices producers receive and the pricing information available to them. This power relation highlights the producers' limited bargaining power and reinforces their dependence on intermediaries as gatekeepers of meaningful participation in the market system.

6.2.2 Governance Structures and Institutional Mediation of Access

Participants also highlighted the role of governance structures in shaping market access. Local governance was described as inconsistent and difficult to access. Producers reported that decisions about market spaces often depend on informal arrangements or personal connections rather than clear procedures. These experiences contributed to a perception that local authorities do not provide predictable or transparent access to market spaces.

At the national level, participants described limited institutional engagement with rural producers. Several noted that government initiatives tend to focus on urban centres, leaving agricultural producers lacking adequate channels of support. Weak enforcement of ecological and organic labelling standards was seen as undermining the efforts of producers who invest in sustainable practices. One producer described the absence of meaningful government action, stating that:

> *We don't see practically any government strategy. We had a meeting a week and a half ago, and they are focused on the big cities. So far, nothing has happened. We're just barely hanging on, and besides that, the municipality's resources are low* (Interviewee 4).

Lacking government involvement not only affects producers directly but also has an effect on a municipal level. Lacking government on a national level also hampers strategies that municipal governance may have. In this sense, producers and local governance both experience the detriments of lacking government strategy and support.

Overall, the findings indicate that producers experience governance structures as fragmented and difficult to navigate. The limited opportunities available to producers due to the influence of unions, intermediaries, and local authorities are highlighted, along with producers' lack of ways to influence these uneven dynamics.

6.3 Producer strategies and support needs

The third research question examines how producers attempt to overcome o the barriers they face and what forms of support they consider necessary to do so. Participants described different ways of increasing production value and marketing to cope with price fluctuations, rising costs, and restricted access to markets. They also expressed concrete expectations regarding changes and support they would like to see from institutions and authorities.

6.3.1 Strategies for navigating market constraints

Participants revealed several strategies aimed at improving their ability to access markets. One approach involved engaging with government programmes. Interviewee 9 described working with the National Vegetable Program, explaining that:

> *There were five priority crops, which were five crops that the country imported annually, in high volumes, and the emphasis was on the production of those five crops* (Interviewee 9)

This showed knowledge and strategy, attempting to align production with identified national priorities.

Some producers also described efforts to establish partnerships with local governance structures. Interviewee 7 stated:

> *We're trying to explore the possibility of forming a partnership. Or contacting the mayor's office to express our desire for their support in marketing our business* (Interviewee 7)

These efforts were presented as attempts to secure institutional backing for commercialisation.

Participants reported initiatives aimed at increasing the value of their products. This included local processing projects designed to retain more value at the producer level. One example mentioned by participants was a municipal processing plant nearing completion, intended to produce ketchup and other condiments using locally sourced crops. Despite these efforts, several participants reported that they had not received answers from the authorities they contacted. Both Interviewees 7 and 9 described attempts to engage with government actors that had not resulted more than a brief exchange of ideas.

6.3.2 Desired support and improvements

Participants identified several areas in which they sought support from organisations and institutions. These included commercialisation, strengthening producer organisations, increasing agricultural production, policy and planning reforms, and value chain development.

Some ecological producers emphasised the need for stricter enforcement of organic production standards. They reported that falsely labelled products undermined their ability to commercialise ecological produce.

> *An organic vegetable will put them [non-organic producers] in a bad situation; someone just needs to convince them that it can be a business too. Share with them that they too can dedicate themselves to the production of healthy vegetables* (Interviewee 1)

Participants also highlighted the importance of producer organisations for managing pests and diseases. They reported that organic pest control was ineffective when applied individually but could be more effective if adopted collectively. A university staff member highlighted how they were in the process of encouraging widespread organic pesticide use. This highlights the emphasised role of coordinated approaches for improving production conditions.

A recurring theme was securing reliable buyers in major market hubs. Participants described two main approaches: selling directly to consumers through supermarkets or private arrangements, or overcoming barriers to access formal market spaces in major commercial centres. In both group interviews in Zongo, participants identified this as their most critical need.

To have the necessary infrastructure and a guaranteed client in La Paz, building some markets, but direct from producer to consumer, that is how we would earn money (group interviewee 2)

A different approach to finding reliable buyers was highlighted by a women's group working with agroforestry. They explained that although they produced natural soaps and related items under their own brand, they were unable to market their products or find buyers. They stated that they needed support to promote these goods.

Participants also discussed financial constraints. Although many technically had access to loans, they reported that the terms and conditions made them practically unviable. Income uncertainty was another concern, as producers often did not know the final sale price of their goods and received payment only after transporters returned from the market. Interviewee 7 emphasised the importance of timely payment:

To have a quick payment, a quick return, would help us feel secure (Interviewee 7)

Across the interviews, producers described a range of strategies aimed at improving market access, including engagement with government programmes, forming partnerships with local authorities, and participating in value-adding initiatives such as processing. They also identified key areas where they sought support, including commercialisation, organisational strengthening, production practices, financial stability, and policy enforcement. Participants consistently reported that while they take active steps to improve their situation, their efforts were limited by institutional weak response or structural constraints.

7. Discussion

This study examined the barriers small-scale producers in Bolivia face in accessing and meaningfully participating in markets, how local market structures and organisations shape these constraints, and how producers navigate them in practice. The findings show that producers encounter a plethora of structural, institutional, and market-related barriers, including rising production costs, limited access to market spaces, dependence on intermediaries, weak regulatory enforcement, and the influence of unions and guilds over market entry. These barriers are exacerbated by governance arrangements that are often politicised, inconsistent, or unresponsive, making it difficult for producers to participate on equitable terms.

The findings highlight that market access is shaped not only by structural barriers but also by the power relations embedded within local market systems. Vendor organisations, intermediaries, and local governance actors play a central role in regulating who can enter markets and under what conditions. Their control over pricing and allocation of market spaces contributes to unequal market access and limits producers' ability to meaningfully derive benefits from the market (Ribot and Peluso, 2003).

Despite these constraints, producers show agency in improving their market position. They engage with government programmes, seek partnerships with municipal authorities, invest in value addition, and organise collectively to strengthen production and commercialisation. However, these strategies are frequently undermined by weak institutional responsiveness, fragmented governance, and limited follow-through from relevant authorities. As a result, producers' efforts often fail to translate into stable or improved market outcomes.

Taken together, the findings indicate that market access for small-scale producers is shaped by the interaction between structural constraints, power relations, and producer agency. While producers actively seek ways to overcome the barriers they face, their ability to do so effectively depends on broader institutional and market conditions that remain largely outside their control. This underscores the need for support that addresses both the systemic barriers limiting market participation and the practical challenges producers encounter in implementing their own strategies.

7.1 What barriers do small-scale producers in Bolivia face in accessing and participating in markets?

The findings show that producers face a range of interconnected barriers that are not only logistical or economic but are reinforced by weak institutional protection and market distortions. Institutions fail to protect producers from external actors that undermine their market participation, while weak enforcement allows contraband to compete, further undermining producer incomes. Unreliable infrastructure and high transport costs added to the stresses of selling produce. As a result, producers face reduced income, limited market participation, and increased uncertainty.

These findings can be understood through the market access framework proposed by Trienekens (2011), which categorises market access into different dimensions, including economic, institutional, infrastructure, and information access. By categorising barriers in this way, it becomes possible to identify where access is lacking and how these constraints increase transaction costs, which is a vital aspect of market access. The findings further demonstrate that these dimensions are interconnected, where a lack of access in one area exacerbates barriers in another.

Economic access is significantly constrained by a combination of price distortions, rising production costs, and structural inequalities within the value chain. Institutionalism would argue that weak enforcement of MPIs has allowed for this market distortion (Anderson and Marcouiller, 2002; Johnson et al., 2013). Contraband products undermine market prices by enabling cheaper, unregulated competition, while producers simultaneously face increasing costs for inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, labour, and transportation. This reduces profit margins, where production expenses rise while returns remain low and unstable. In addition, price volatility and uncertainty regarding final sale prices increase financial risk, limiting producers' ability to plan and invest effectively. Producers' lack of control over pricing and reliance on intermediated market channels further restrict economic access, as value is captured at later stages of the value chain, leaving producers with a disproportionately small share of the final sales price. This is in line with Stiffel and Minten (2008), who argue that poor infrastructure negatively affects pricing. Additionally, producers' lack of access to financial inputs, such as loans, further hinders their economic access. Economic access in this context, therefore, extends beyond participation in markets to include the ability to securely receive stable, sufficient income and to participate sustainably in economic activities. Increasing input costs mean producers may struggle to adequately prepare their crops, potentially leading to poorer yields, lower income, and fewer available inputs in the following growing season.

Institutional access refers to how producers participate in the formal and informal institutions that govern market access. Trienekens (2011: 56) describes lacking institutional access as "situations where institutional arrangements that support markets are absent, weak or fail to accomplish the role expected from them". Participants discussed how they felt left out or abandoned by government structures that are supposed to support them. Attempts had been made to contact the governor's office directly to discuss access to a physical market space. However, the participant was turned away and not given an opportunity to discuss their concern, nor an explanation as to why they could not access a market space. Furthermore, the lack of quality standards, regulations, and certification systems detrimentally affects producers growing organic produce, who are outcompeted by organically marketed non-organic produce sold at lower prices. Despite producers contacting government officials regarding these issues, they have not been able to establish reciprocal contact. Another aspect of institutional access concerns institutional responsibility for investments in infrastructure. Although participants in Valles Cruceños expressed appreciation for the rapid response when landslides completely closed the main road, they also highlighted the need for more permanent and preventive solutions rather than reactive fixes.

Infrastructure access includes not only physical access to markets, but also access to communication with buyers, cooling facilities, water infrastructure, and processing infrastructure. Participants identified significant challenges related to infrastructure and transport, aligning with the claims about infrastructure that Meng et al. highlight. Poor road conditions and vulnerability to disruptions such as landslides increase both the cost and risk of transporting goods to market, in some cases resulting in complete crop losses. Infrastructure highlights one of several transaction costs, and is, according to Meng et al. (2024), the most vital, and can make a substantial difference according to the World Bank (2004). Rising fuel prices further exacerbate these challenges, increasing transportation costs and reducing already narrow profit margins. Physical market access is therefore severely constrained by lacking infrastructure in the topographically challenging areas where interviews were conducted. Participants also described difficulties in accessing direct buyers, limiting opportunities to sell produce beyond existing market channels.

At the same time, limited access to reliable market information creates additional uncertainty. Producers often do not know the final sale price of their products until after they have been sold, and payment may take days to arrive. Information access therefore affects not only income anticipation, but also producers' ability to determine production strategies, such as which crops to plant. Lacking information access burdens producers both before and after planting and harvesting and constrains their agency within production. Market information access is key to integration into value chains (Trienekens, 2011), yet producers have limited access to transparent and reliable pricing information, restricting their ability to effectively plan production and market participation. One participant mentioned the existence of an ICT system intended to provide updated market information, but added that prices were inaccurate. Reliance on intermediaries for pricing leads to exploitation (Aker, 2010; Jensen, 2007 and Fafchamps, 2004), however, Omar (2025) argues that ICT improvements help protect producers from pricing related exploitation.

Overall, institutional failures, weak infrastructure, and limited financial and market information access create serious barriers to market access for producers. Together, these factors increase the cost and risk of production and market participation, limiting producers' ability to benefit even when physical access to markets is possible. These findings demonstrate that market access is shaped by multiple overlapping constraints that affect producers' economic stability, production planning, and long-term participation in agrifood markets.

7.2 How do local market structures and vendor organizations influence producers' ability to access market spaces?

The findings indicate that market access is shaped by institutional arrangements and power relations that regulate and restrict producers' ability to participate in markets. Institutional and relational mechanisms work together to control market access, undermining what traditionally exemplifies an open market. Access to market spaces is heavily controlled and regulated through informal relations, restricting producers' ability to sell their produce at market price. According to Bebbington (1999), this demonstrates how informal governance structures may override formal allocation systems, resulting in access being mediated through social embeddedness rather than transparent institutional procedures.

Study participants highlighted how unequal power relations between producers and institutions, such as unions and guilds, structure access to markets. These actors play a central role in regulating entry and participation. Institutional structures that are intended to facilitate market access may instead reinforce existing inequalities, while intermediaries occupy key positions that allow them to influence pricing and control market participation. In the void of MPIs, Lindell (1020) and Meagher (2018) highlight how informal structure shape the market. Participants highlighted how they had tried to physically gain access to market spaces in their market centres, but were unable to due to intermediaries actively excluding them. As a result, producers must sell their produce for a low price to intermediaries, who then sell it for market price, despite not taking on any of the risks associated with agricultural production. Johson et al. (2013) and Anderson and Marcouiller (2002) both highlight how this lack of state intervention and enforcement leads to weak MPIs, and uneven market dynamics.

From an access theory perspective, market participation emerges as a process mediated by institutional and relational mechanisms, through which powerful actors regulate and constrain producers' ability to benefit from market engagement. In this study, these mechanisms operate across several dimensions and intertwine at multiple levels. Ribot and Peluso apply relational and institutional access, "some people and institutions control resource access while others must maintain their access through those who have control" (2003. p154). Power relations are not a static phenomena, and access is constantly shifting as the "webs of power" are changing.

Relational access is mediated by institutions, unions and intermediaries, who regulate entry into markets and influence price formation. One participant described how her access to a new market space, facilitated through a municipal project, was ultimately granted only to individuals known within existing networks. Research has shown that formal and informal rules cannot fully control all pathways to resource access, as “webs of power” are too complex to separate. In light of how market access structures operate, relational access can be seen as a key determinant of participation. Laserna (2001) and Farthing and Kohl (2014) emphasise how access is layered and dependent on social position. Unions and intermediaries, through their strong social networks, are able to exert influence and control, creating dependency and reducing producers’ bargaining power. One key aspect of relational access is that it often operates outside of formal legal systems, institutional capacity and integrity strongly affects how relational access can lead to institutional access. The importance of relationships in market access highlights how different dependencies shape producers' access, dependency on intermediaries, dependency on networks and dependency on politically mediated access.

Institutional access is shaped by local governance structures and the allocation of market spaces, which participants described as inconsistent and politically influenced. Although market access is formally governed through municipal allocation systems and regulatory institutions, participants’ experiences suggest that actual access is often mediated through informal networks and social relationships. This reflects how formal institutional arrangements may coexist with informal systems of influence and negotiation, where access depends less on official procedures and more on embedded social relations. Institutional structures therefore do not operate as neutral systems of allocation, but as socially mediated mechanisms shaped by unequal power relations. This undermines trust in institutions and reduces incentives for investment, detriments of weak MPIs (Anderson and Marcouiller, 2002; Johnson et al., 2013). Rather than enabling market participation, weak governance structures restrict it. Power and influence are centralised to the market centres, where formal and informal institutions such as local governance and intermediaries preside. Centralisation of power excludes those in the peripheries, like rural producers. Intermediaries do not actually control market spaces, but since they have relational and institutional access, they can benefit from those who control the market spaces, in this case, local governments, further strengthening Meagher’s (2016) results.

Economic access is fundamentally tied to power; intermediaries have power over market spaces, prices, supply chains, and can influence regulations (such as regulating who gets allocated a market space). Ribot and Peluso (2003) highlight how those in power create their own webs of power through their economic muscle. Economic access is shaped by the ability to benefit from one's resources; having a resource (such as agricultural produce) is not enough; selling it at a market and financially benefiting is required as well. Intermediaries, being gatekeepers of market access and thus proper financial benefit, limit producers’ economic access. Furthermore, the presence of contraband and controlled access to markets reflects failures in institutional enforcement, allowing informal systems to undermine formal market regulation. Unequal economic access also limits producers’ ability to accumulate capital and reinvest in production. As producers receive only a small share of the final market value, opportunities for improved production capacity and financial security remain constrained.

Economic access, therefore, affects not only immediate income, but also long-term participation and mobility within agrifood value chains.

Market access is not neutral; it is institutionally mediated through overlapping relational, institutional, and economic mechanisms. Formal governance structures coexist with informal power structures, where participation is heavily influenced by social relations. Beneficial relationships with intermediaries and local governance actors shape participation in. These dynamics reinforce unequal power relations and limit producers' ability to engage in markets on equitable terms

7.3 Producer Agency and Required Institutional Support

The findings indicate that small-scale producers actively develop and pursue strategies to improve their market access, demonstrating a strong understanding of market systems, value chains, and the institutional arrangements that shape participation. Rather than being passive passengers of structural barriers identified in the previous sections, producers attempt to overcome these constraints through engagement with government programmes, partnerships with local authorities, value addition, and collective organisation. The findings show that these strategies are rarely sufficient on their own, and that producers' efforts are frequently undermined by weak institutional responsiveness, inadequate infrastructure, and persistent financial insecurity. Consequently, the support they require extends beyond isolated technical interventions and includes broader reforms to the institutional and market environment.

Several participants described efforts to align production with national agricultural programmes targeting crops with high domestic demand and import substitution potential. By adapting production to the priorities of programmes such as the National Vegetable Program, producers seek to position themselves within state-led development initiatives and thereby gain access to new market opportunities. Others attempted to establish partnerships with municipal governments to obtain support for marketing, infrastructure, and access to formal market spaces. These actions indicate that producers understand market access as something that is actively negotiated through engagement with institutions rather than achieved solely through increased production.

Producers also described strategies to increase their share of value captured in the supply chain. Local processing initiatives, such as municipal investments in facilities to produce ketchup and other condiments, were seen as opportunities to reduce dependence on intermediaries and retain a greater proportion of final product value within producer communities. M4P projects in Bolivia have focused on value chain development, which shows that organisations such as Sida and Swisscontact projects align with producer needs. These efforts demonstrate an understanding of value chain dynamics, whereby participation in processing and branding can strengthen bargaining power and reduce vulnerability to price capture at later stages of the chain.

Collective action emerged as another central strategy. Participants highlighted the importance of cooperatives and producer organisations both for improving market access and for addressing production challenges such as pest and disease management. This was particularly evident among ecological producers, who noted that organic pest control is only effective when adopted collectively across a wider area. These cooperative strategies follow Permadi and Winarti (2025) and Aku et al. (2018) on how they increase market access and reduce reliance on intermediaries. Producer organisations were therefore understood not only as mechanisms for commercialisation, but also as platforms for coordinating production practices and strengthening producers' collective negotiating power.

Despite producers showing agency, there is still a significant gap between producer initiative and institutional responsiveness. Several participants reported that efforts to engage with government agencies and local authorities failed to produce tangible outcomes. Requests for support often received no response, and proposed collaborations did not progress beyond initial discussions. This suggests that while producers attempt to mobilise institutional and relational channels of access, these channels are frequently blocked by weak state capacity, fragmented governance, and limited follow-through, directly countering Carlsson and Sandström (2008) argument of responsive local governance. Producers possess strategies to navigate market barriers, but their success depends on whether institutions can respond effectively.

The most frequently cited need was assistance with commercialisation, particularly securing reliable buyers in major market centres and establishing direct producer-to-consumer channels. Participants in Zongo emphasised the importance of guaranteed clients in La Paz and infrastructure that would enable them to bypass traditional intermediary-controlled market access. This highlights that producers strongly value stable and transparent market relationships that provide predictable returns.

Participants also emphasised the need to strengthen producer organisations and reform regulatory frameworks. Ecological producers called for stricter enforcement of organic standards to prevent falsely labelled products from undercutting legitimate producers. Others highlighted the need for institutional support to expand value chain development. Throughout the interviews, the issue of weak or lacking MPIs has occurred, highlighting that if locally contextualised, the definition and role of formal national institutions and MPIs by Evenett and Hoekman (2004), Johnson et al. (2013) and Anderson and Marcouiller (2002) can apply to specific contexts such as those of this study.

Financial support was another recurring priority. Although loans are accessible, participants reported that lending conditions often make loans inaccessible in practice. Uncertainty regarding final sale prices and payment delays further exacerbate financial insecurity and reduce producers' capacity to invest. Quick and reliable payment systems were described as particularly important because they could provide a degree of predictability within an otherwise uncertain market environment.

From the perspective of access theory, these findings demonstrate that producers are not passive subjects of exclusion but actors that constantly adapt in order to derive benefit from markets. Producers attempt to mobilise relational access by cultivating partnerships with municipal governments, institutional access by engaging with agricultural programmes and regulatory bodies, and economic access by investing in value addition and improved commercialisation. However, access theory also highlights that actors' ability to benefit depends on whether those controlling access permit or support these efforts. Producers may implement strategies, but their capacity to benefit remains limited by the responsiveness of institutions.

Institutionalism further explains why many of these strategies fail to generate meaningful change. Existing institutional arrangements have become entrenched in ways that privilege intermediaries and established market actors. Producers' repeated but unsuccessful attempts to secure support reveal how institutional inertia and path dependence reproduce exclusionary outcomes. Institutions thus shape not only the barriers producers face, but also the effectiveness of the strategies they employ to overcome them.

MFA helps specify the concrete forms of support required. Producers' requests for guaranteed buyers and direct sales channels relate primarily to economic access; demands for stronger cooperatives and regulatory enforcement correspond to institutional access; calls for processing facilities and market infrastructure reflect physical access; and the need for predictable prices and rapid payment systems relates to both information and economic access. Viewed together, these support needs show that effective market participation depends on simultaneous improvements across multiple dimensions of access rather than isolated interventions.

Small-scale producers in Bolivia demonstrate considerable agency in navigating market barriers. Through institutional engagement, value addition, and collective organisation, they actively seek to reshape their position within agricultural markets and capture greater benefits from production. However, these strategies remain limited by institutional weaknesses, unequal power relations, and limited state responsiveness. Therefore, producers require coordinated support targeting commercialisation, finance, infrastructure, regulatory enforcement, and organisational strengthening. The findings in this study suggest that overcoming market barriers is not primarily a matter of capacity building among producers, but of tearing down the institutional inefficiencies that impede producers from exercising their agency.

7.4 Integrated Discussion

Market access for small-scale producers in Bolivia is best understood as a relational and institutional interaction between producer agency and structurally embedded constraints. Producers are not passive participants in agricultural markets; they demonstrate substantial knowledge of market dynamics and actively pursue strategies such as collective organisation, engagement with state programmes, and value addition through processing and improved commercialisation. This finding supports Scoones (2015), who conceptualises livelihoods as adaptive and strategic processes, and Cleaver (2012), who shows how actors navigate institutions through institutional bricolage by combining formal and informal arrangements.

The findings emphasise that these strategies operate within unequal power relations, limited institutional responsiveness, and persistent infrastructural and economic constraints. This suggests that market participation does not automatically lead to improved outcomes. In this respect, the study challenges more technocratic approaches that define market access primarily as equal participation in functioning markets (e.g., Barrett, 2008) or emphasise coordination and upgrading within value chains (Trienekens, 2011). These perspectives identify structural dimensions; however, they fail to stress the importance of power relations and informal governance arrangements that shape who can benefit from market participation.

Ribot and Peluso's (2003) Access Theory, which defines access as the ability to derive benefits rather than merely to enter markets, aligns very well with the findings of the study. Producers showed agency, but their ability to take advantage of it was hindered by their position within institutional and relational structures. This reflects Hickey and du Toit's (2007) concept of adverse incorporation, whereby marginalised actors are included in markets on terms that reproduce rather than reduce inequality.

Meagher (2016) argues that markets are socially governed rather than institutionally neutral, further highlighting the importance of informal rules and social relations. Additionally, Helmke and Levitsky (2004) show that unwritten but socially enforced rules apply pressure as strongly as formal regulations. Pierson (2000) helps explain why these patterns persist, as institutions tend to reproduce established distributions of power over time. In the Bolivian context, this interpretation aligns with Farthing and Kohl (2014), who show that state-led reforms coexist with enduring structural inequalities and strong intermediary institutions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that market access is neither a neutral nor purely technical process. Rather, it is a politically and institutionally mediated outcome in which producer agency is necessary but not sufficient for achieving equitable and sustained benefits. Meaningful market inclusion therefore depends not only on physical connectivity or formal participation, but on the institutional and relational conditions that determine whether producers are able to convert market participation into improved livelihoods.

7.5 Implications

7.5.1 Theoretical Implications

The study demonstrates the value of combining Access Theory, Historical Institutionalism, and the Market Access Framework. While the Market Access Framework identifies the economic, infrastructural, and institutional dimensions of market participation, Access Theory and Historical Institutionalism extend this perspective by foregrounding power, benefit realisation, and institutional persistence. Together, these approaches show that market access should be understood not as a static condition, but as a relational process shaped by agency and historically embedded structures.

7.5.2 Empirical Implications

The findings highlight that small-scale producers possess substantial capacity and detailed knowledge of market systems. This supports livelihood-oriented perspectives that view producers as adaptive actors rather than passive beneficiaries. Furthermore, the study shows that agency alone does not overcome entrenched inequalities, reinforcing the need for empirical research examining how structural, institutional, and relational constraints intersect in everyday market participation.

7.5.3Practical Implications (Non-Policy)

For development practitioners, cooperatives, and non-governmental organisations, the findings suggest that improving infrastructure or strengthening market linkages may be insufficient if local power relations and informal governance structures remain unaddressed. Efforts to support producers should therefore be grounded in an understanding of who controls access to market spaces, information, and commercial networks, and how these forms of control shape the distribution of benefits.

7.6 Limitations

This study is based on a qualitative case study of selected regions in Bolivia and is intended to provide analytical rather than statistical generalisation. The findings reflect the experiences and perceptions of the producers and stakeholders interviewed and may not capture the full diversity of Bolivia's agricultural sector. Because interviews were conducted across multiple languages, some nuances may have been lost during translation and interpretation. Finally, as with all qualitative research, the analysis is shaped by the researcher's positionality and interpretive choices, particularly in the application of Access Theory and institutional perspectives to the empirical material.

8. Conclusion

This thesis has argued that market access for small-scale agricultural producers in Bolivia is not only a matter of entering markets or participating in formal exchange systems, but an interconnected, relational, and institutional process shaped by the interplay among producer agency, informal governance structures, and embedded structural constraints. While producers actively seek to improve their market position, their ability to meaningfully benefit from participation is limited. It depends on power relations, institutional responsiveness, and intermediary control over market spaces and value distribution. Market access is therefore not a neutral condition, but a result of overlapping economic, institutional, and relational mechanisms that determine who can participate and under what terms.

Three interconnected findings emerge from the analysis. Firstly, producers face multiple structural barriers that limit both participation and the ability to benefit. Among them are weak institutional enforcement, poor infrastructure, high transport costs, price volatility, limited financial access, and unreliable market information. These constraints are mutually reinforcing: weak infrastructure increases transaction costs, institutional failures enable unfair competition such as contraband, and information asymmetries reduce producers' ability to plan. According to Trienekens (2011), these findings show that the economic, institutional, infrastructural, and informational dimensions of access are deeply interconnected rather than separable.

Secondly, local structures and informal governance systems that regulate participation shape market access. Market spaces are controlled by intermediaries, unions, and local organisations that act as gatekeepers. These actors influence access to market stalls and pricing, often limiting direct participation and forcing producers into relationships in which a large share of value is captured elsewhere. This reflects Ribot and Peluso's (2003) Access Theory, which emphasises that access is defined not by formal rights but by the ability to derive benefit through socially and institutionally mediated relations. Informal institutions, as described by Meagher (2016) and Helmke and Levitsky (2004), play a decisive role in shaping outcomes, often overriding formal market space systems. Over time these patterns become stabilised through institutional persistence (Pierson, 2000), reinforcing unequal power relations. In Bolivia, this is compounded by weak governance and the continued influence of intermediary actors, as noted by Farthing and Kohl (2014).

Thirdly, producers are not passive within these structures but actively develop strategies to navigate them. By aligning production with state programmes, pursuing value addition, and seeking partnerships with local authorities, they engage in collective organisation. These strategies reflect strong market knowledge and adaptive capacity, consistent with Scoones (2015) and Cleaver's (2012) concept of institutional bricolage. Unfortunately, their effectiveness is limited by weak institutional responsiveness. Producers often encounter passive institutions, highlighting how initiative is hindered by institutional capacity. As a result, agency alone is insufficient to create change, as access ultimately depends on whether controlling actors enable or block these strategies.

These findings show that market access in Bolivia is politically and institutionally mediated. Intermediaries and weak MPIs limit producers' ability to benefit from the market, even when they can access it. This aligns with Hickey and du Toit's (2007) concept of adverse incorporation, in which inclusion reproduces rather than reduces inequality.

The study challenges technocratic and value-chain approaches that assume that improved infrastructure, coordination, or participation will automatically lead to better outcomes. Instead, the study shows that market access is shaped by deeper power relations and governance structures. Without addressing intermediary control, informal governance, and weak institutional responsiveness, technical improvements risk leaving underlying inequalities intact or even reinforcing them.

Overall, the thesis highlights that rural development outcomes depend not only on market entry but also on who controls access and how value is distributed within markets. This shifts the focus from participation to the ability to derive benefits, and from inclusion to the conditions that make it meaningful.

Finally, improving market access for small-scale producers requires more than expanding participation. It also requires addressing the institutional and relational structures that determine who benefits from markets. Future research should therefore focus on how market systems can be restructured so that participation more consistently translates into equitable and sustainable livelihoods.

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10. Appendix

Appendix A. Open-ended Questions

1. Describe the main challenges you face when trying to sell your products in formal markets
2. Are there challenges to accessing informal markets?
3. Can prices be negotiated with buyers? Do you keep selling your product if prices are low, or do you wait?
4. What kind of support would help them access markets?
5. Do seasonal changes affect your ability to sell products?
6. Do cooperatives or associations play a role in your access to the market?
7. How do you perceive your access to markets compared to that of others?
8. Does the government play a role in your market access?
9. Do transportation issues affect your sales?
10. What strategies have you tried to overcome market barriers?

Appendix B. Focused Questions

1. Do you have access to storage facilities?
2. Can you always sell what you produce, or does some of it go to waste?
3. Do you have access to credit or loans?
4. Do you have access to accurate market information before selling?
5. Have you participated in training programs related to market access?
6. How often do you sell to formal markets?
7. What is your main means of transportation?
8. How many markets do you usually sell to?
9. Have climate-related issues affected your ability to participate in markets?
10. What is the distance to the nearest provider of agricultural inputs?

Appendix C. Codes

Theme/Code	Description	Files	References
Market Barriers	General theme for market barriers	13	83
Institutional and Structural Barriers	Sub-theme for market barriers, highlighting actors and power relations that shape market access.	7	14
Contraband smugglers	Competition from illegally imported goods affecting producers' ability to sell.	3	7
Institutional actors	The role of government agencies, municipalities, and other institutions.	3	4
Unions and Guilds	Vendor organisations regulating producers' access to market spaces.	3	3
Market System Barriers	Constraints within the market system that affect producers' ability to access and benefit from market participation.	12	52
Middlemen	Dependence on intermediaries to access buyers and market opportunities.	7	12
No regulation of organic produce	Competition of falsely marketed organic produce.	1	5
Physical market space	Availability and control of formal market selling spaces.	6	12
Transport Costs	The financial and logistical costs of reaching markets.	10	13
Infrastructure	Limitations in roads, transport networks, and related facilities that affect producers' ability to reach markets.	6	6

Theme/Code	Description	Files	References
Uncertainty of returns from selling produce	Unpredictability regarding the prices or profits producers will receive from market sales.	4	6
Risk of produce loss due to unsold inventory	The possibility that perishable goods will spoil or lose value if they are not sold.	5	6
Access to cooling facilities	Availability of refrigeration or cold storage needed to preserve perishable products.	3	3
Value chain position	The role producers occupy within the value chain and how this affects their bargaining power and returns.	3	3
Production Related Barriers	Constraints related to agricultural production that limit producers' ability to supply markets consistently.	8	17
Input cost increases	Rising prices of agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and equipment.	5	7
Strategies that interviewees have adopted to gain market access	Actions taken by producers to overcome barriers and improve their participation in markets.	8	12
Asked for government assistance	Requests made to public institutions for support to improve production or market access.	2	2
Band together in co-ops	Collective organisation among producers to strengthen bargaining power and market opportunities.	1	1

Theme/Code	Description	Files	References
Packaging and marketing, value chain development	Efforts to improve product presentation, promotion, and integration into higher-value markets.	5	7
What support is expected	Forms of assistance participants identified as necessary to improve market access and participation.	10	64
Commercialisation	Support to help producers market and sell their products more effectively.	5	11
Increase agricultural production	Assistance aimed at expanding output and improving productivity.	6	10
Institutional assistance	Support provided by government agencies, municipalities, universities, or development organisations.	7	10
Physical Market Space	Improved access to formal market facilities and designated spaces for selling products.	7	14
Strengthen producer organisations	Support to build the capacity and effectiveness of cooperatives and other producer groups.	6	15
Value chain development	Interventions to improve coordination, upgrading, and value creation along the supply chain.	3	4