Helping at the heart of tea communities

Sri Lanka

Ethical Tea Partnership
Improving the lives of tea workers and their environment

www.ethicalteapartnership.org

In Sri Lanka Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) and CARE International have implemented Community Development Forums on 13 ETP-monitored estates. Building on CARE's tried and tested approach, and co-funded with the EU, CDFs have led to a host of positive developments, including better relationships between workers and management, improved productivity, the advancement of female rights and increased worker morale and dignity.

Background

Tea is one of Sri Lanka's primary export earners and sources of employment. Tea employs around 10% of the population, the majority of whom are of Tamil origin, brought over from South India by the British when they established the first tea plantations back in the 1800s.

Past history still influences the estates and surrounding communities today, with divisions between the Tamil and Singhalese communities. Estate structures remain hierarchical and the relationship between management and workers is often strained, especially during wage negotiations.

Community Development Forums

In order to improve the relationship between estate management and workers, Community Development Forums (CDFs) have been established to help facilitate open dialogue and resolve difficult issues.

CDFs are 'mini parliaments' that give all groups from the estate and the local community the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives. They bring estate management, workers, trade union officials, community representatives and government officials together to discuss work matters and the wellbeing of the estate and community in general.

Project benefits

- Increased pride in estate and enjoyment of work, 78% of workers increased their attendance at work
- Fewer strikes and conflicts, 82% of workers felt a greater sense of ownership towards the plantation
- Improved productivity, with increases of up to 25% seen by some estates
- Increased practical skills and income generation, 78% of workers felt that they were better equipped to manage their finances, 60% of workers increased their plucking rate after training
- Improvement in education, medical and recreational facilities, reduction in problems such as alcoholism
- Greater interaction between Sinhalese and Tamil communities
- Improved quality of life, 75% felt that their overall quality of live had improved

*All figures from an independent source

A wide range of education and development programmes, and estate improvements are also coordinated through CDFs including:

- Gender & negotiation skills training
- Work training (plucking techniques)
- Household budget management & savings schemes
- Estate improvements (e.g. crèches and medical facilities)

"This mutual respect has made possible a range of practical activities that led to improvements in various aspects of both worker wellbeing and the estates' productivity." Dr. Dan Seevaratnam, Chief Executive Officer, Wattawala Plantations

A more committed and productive workforce

Increased trust and an environment that encourages positive discussions has led to more favourable resolutions to issues for both management and workers.

Management staff all reported a reduction in the time they spend each day dealing with workforce related problems. Workers and management understand each others' needs better and more constructive negotiations and targeted training has led to improved organisation and efficiency of plucking, boosting productivity in some estates by as much as 25%.

Smoother wage negotiations

The overall impact that CDFs have made was exemplified during the wage negotiations in 2009 when a sector-wide 'go-slow' campaign was organised. While this led to reduced plucking levels on most estates, and violence and damage to estate property on some, those with CDFs in place reported far fewer negative impacts, with plucking levels remaining constant and no accounts of damage or violence.

"People feel their ideas are respected and this gives them a sense of pride... If I am transferred to another estate, I would like to replicate this process there."

Prasanna Premachandra,
Deputy Manager, Carolina Estate

Opportunities for women

Although the majority of the workforce in the Sri Lankan tea sector is female, opportunities for them to develop their careers is limited. Even the initial supervisory level of Kangani (leader of a plucking team) has remained a male preserve. To compound matters, it's also widely accepted for men to collect the wages of female relatives.

Women are encouraged to take an active involvement in CDFs and this has led to them being treated on more equal terms both at work and in the local community.

This is highlighted by one estate appointing its first ever female Kanganis and an increase in the number of female employees that collect their own wages.

Tackling Alcoholism

On Sri Lankan tea estates the brewing and selling of illicit alcohol is common place, causing a range of problems.

CDFs have been used to educate workers about alcoholism and provided a platform to devise initiatives to tackle it. One Estate Manager been able to prevent the illegal sale of alcohol by offering such vendors fixed-term employment.

Complying with international standards

ETP also uses the CDF to seek insight from the workers about the estate's social and environmental compliance. In the past management may have viewed this with suspicion and seen it as a threat.

Since its introduction the CDF programme has nurtured strong relationships between workers and management to the extent that they can now sit together and openly discuss where there are gaps between their performance and the ETP Standard. This has boosted worker morale, and given them a stronger sense of dignity by making them a partner of change.

CARE International is one of the world's leading aid agencies. As part of its long-running Plantation Communities Empowerment Project (PCEP), CARE Sri Lanka designed the CDF methodology. CDFs are now in operation across 17 estates. For more information, please visit www.careinternational.org.uk