

Ethical Tea Partnership - Supporting Change in Assam (15/03/16)

Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) is an international membership organization of 40+ tea companies and retailers, working together to make a positive difference in tea-growing regions and to improve the lives and livelihoods of people who produce tea.

We have expert regional staff on the ground in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, China, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, and a London-based team. Together with a network of partner organisations, we support, advise, and train tea producers and workers to raise standards on tea estates, processing factories, and smallholder communities. Working with development agencies, governmental, and non-governmental organisations we also run and support projects that address complex issues in tea communities.

Many of the places where tea is grown, such as Assam, have high poverty levels and long-standing problems that require a huge amount of change. The Indian tea industry is large, second only to China. Over 80% of tea produced is for the local Indian market and the majority of exports are to Russia, other Asian countries, and the Middle East. Most of ETP's work is done in partnership with other organisations, including Indian institutions and the Indian Government, as this is the best way to achieve change.

ETP's partnerships are making a real difference on issues raised by CNN.

Eliminating child labour, exploitation, trafficking; and improving opportunities for young people in tea communities

The employment of children in tea production is completely unacceptable. ETP works closely with tea producers to ensure good working conditions and management practices, including working towards the eradication of the employment of children. ETP and its members take any reports of underage working extremely seriously. If a producer is found employing children, ETP will work with local partners to ensure the children are safe, and return to school or vocational training, and that there are strong systems in place to ensure that tea gardens are safe and nurturing environments for children.

Children and young people face serious issues in many rural communities in India, including Assam. For example, 41% of Indian children fail to complete eight years of education and 43% of girls are married before they are 18.

ETP has entered into a major partnership with UNICEF in Assam to work with 350 communities linked to more than 100 tea estates to enable young people to have a brighter future. The three-year programme will:

- Equip more than 25,000 girls with the knowledge on their rights and "life skills" (such as confidence building and negotiation skills) that will help them in being more resilient so to secure a better future and reduce their vulnerability to violence, abuse, and exploitation
- Make families in each community aware of children's rights and the support they can call on to help educate and protect their children;
- Work with state and district government to improve the quality of education and the effectiveness of child protection policies to help make a sustainable difference to the lives of children now and for many years to come;
- Work with government agencies to revise the Plantation Labour Act so as to ensure the protection and promotion of children's rights

Ultimately this programme is supporting young women in tea communities to better understand their rights and works with them and their communities to enable them to have more control over their lives and become agents of change within their communities. We hope in this way we can help protect these young women and other girls in the community from trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

Progress to date:

- Adolescent Girl's Groups and Child Protections Committees have been established on a number of estates and existing ones have been strengthened. The Girl's Groups educate girls on child abuse, exploitation, and violence, provide life skills training (such as negotiation skills and communication skills), and empower them to participate in decision-making that impacts their lives.
 - The clubs also facilitate learning on other issues such as alcoholism, dietary information, sanitary and menstrual hygiene, the importance of a good education, as well as recreational activities like singing, dancing, martial arts and sports. The wide and varied curricula gives them new opportunities and will hopefully inspire and empower them to make good life choices.
 - On a recent field trip, funding partners met with the girls and were impressed with the girls' confidence. When asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Their answers included doctors, nurses, lawyers, a police officer, an actress, an airhostess etc.
- Organised a conference in India with the National Law University to discuss the impact of the Plantation Labour Act (the regulatory framework governing tea estates) on children's rights. This was attended by senior representation of government, business and NGOs and is leading to recommendations for improving the Plantation Labour Act.
- More than 600 front line workers (including Mothers Groups, Welfare Officers, Tea Garden Management) across 56 tea gardens have been trained on child protection issues. This pool of staff will help ensure children and families are better informed about child exploitation issues.
- Training and child exploitation awareness campaigns have been conducted. This included a 2-day training programme on child development and child protection for 400 self-help group members in the Dibrugarh District.
- A statewide workshop to develop the capacity of front line child protection staff at government and NGO/Tea Management Association level was held. The main aim of the workshop was to improve the way that front line officers deal and interact with children on child protection cases.
- Supported the launch of a *Child Protection Day* in the state of Assam, which is held 4th March each year – Assam is the first state in India to do this

Improving Sanitation

Poor sanitation is a major problem across India. Almost half the Indian population doesn't have a toilet and 75% of the surface water in India is contaminated by sewage. Several years ago ETP's partnership with the Indian Tea Association, using technical assistance from UNICEF, improved the installation of water pumps and latrines, and was designed to demonstrate efficient ways of improving facilities to enable further rollout and replication by estates. There is increasing investment by tea producers but there remains much more to be done. Prime Minister Modi has announced a major programme to improve sanitation across the board in India, which is a welcome boost.

Training and support to improve standards

ETP offers training and support programmes to raise standards around health and safety, environmental management, and the safe-use of pesticides. Agrochemical management is one of the hardest problems to achieve comprehensive change on, as poor practice has been embedded for so long. We know that some people continue to spray without protective clothing despite provision of proper equipment and training programmes, often because of the incredibly humid climate. This is an issue we are continuing to focus on.

In India, as well as supporting export-oriented producers to meet international social and environmental standards, ETP is involved in Trustea, a programme chaired by the Indian Tea Board, part of the Ministry of Commerce, to improve social and environmental standards across the entire Indian tea industry. Trustea brings together key organisations in the Indian tea sector and aims to reach all segments of the Indian industry, which is critical in achieving change on some of the systemic problems that CNN raises.

In March 2014, the Tea Board of India unveiled the *Plant Protection Code*, which Trustea helped develop. This landmark policy requires the industry to minimise pesticide use and ensure responsible chemical management. It is a key framework to improve agrochemical use in the tea industry.

Improving wages and benefits

ETP and Oxfam have been leading a multi-stakeholder consortium of organisations to increase understanding about wages, benefits and basic needs, and address concerns about wages and benefits in the tea industry.

The release of the ETP and Oxfam led report *Understanding Wage Issues in the Tea Industry* in May 2013 highlighted that estate worker wage packages are made up of cash and in-kind benefits and that tea worker wages are set at the regional or national level, not by individual companies, so all tea workers in a region are paid the same rate regardless of the profitability or certification of the estate. The report increased consensus about the need for improvements and that changes are needed to regional wage-setting processes and to the value and balance of the cash and in-kind components of tea worker wages.

Audits show that tea producers are paying legally required wages, however, concerns remain about the ability of wages in some tea-growing countries to provide decent livelihoods.

The approach to change varies from country to country. In Malawi, ETP is successfully involved in a large-scale programme involving the supply chain, NGOs, unions, and government to improve the competitiveness of the industry and workers' wages and benefits.

In India, where the 80% per cent of tea is produced for the domestic market and there are long-established wage-setting processes involving the Indian tea producers association, unions, and government, change will be driven much more from within the country.

Increasing wages is on the agenda in India. The last collective bargaining agreement for Assam, which came into effect on 1 January 2015, raised cash wages from Rs95 to Rs115 per day. At the start of 2016 this was raised to Rs126 and in 2017 it will be increased to Rs137. The latest proposal from the Assam Government is that the cash part of the overall package should be increased to Rs143 to bring it more into line with other sectors. ETP will continue to use the influence that we have to support improvements on wages and benefits.

Bringing together partners to accelerate progress

Each year, ETP hosts TEAM UP, the largest conference on tea and sustainability. In 2015, 80 organisations from business, government, and ETP's development partners came together to discuss ways to accelerate change. In 2016, TEAM UP will be held in India, bringing together several hundred senior delegates to agree how to develop and scale-up approaches to deal with the sustainability challenges facing the Indian tea industry and communities.