Supporting Change in Assam

The tea industry in Assam is affected by multiple social and environmental issues, many of which are deep-rooted. These issues are known to the Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) - a not for profit organisation with a membership of almost 50 international tea companies and retailers. We convene industry, development agencies, governmental, and non-governmental organisations to improve the lives of communities within the tea sector. We work with a range of expert partners in Assam on programmes that improve conditions for tea workers, farmers, communities, and the environment in which tea is produced.

While poverty, according to the World Bank, has declined sharply over the last couple of decades it still endures in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa – where many tea growing regions are located. Poverty so often comes hand-in-hand with a range of other issues such as poor health and well-being, malnourishment, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, low quality housing, unsafe migration, and limited access to education to name a few.

The Indian Tea Sector

The Indian tea industry is large (second only to China) and over 80% of Indian tea is consumed within India. The majority of exports are for Russia, other Asian countries, and the Middle East. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 (PLA) governs the Indian tea industry. The law covers employment matters such as working hours, wages, and leave, while also providing clear guidelines for healthcare, sanitation, canteens, accommodation, educational, recreational, and other facilities that the tea gardens must provide for their workers.

However, these services are not always provided at a decent quality and government schemes are yet to reach all tea communities. ETP therefore works in partnership with a range of organisations, including Indian institutions and the Indian Government, to improve the economic, social, and environmental conditions of the Indian tea industry. So, how is ETP’s work contributing to change in Assam?

Improving Young Lives

Unicef and ETP have been working to improve the lives of those in tea communities for many years. In 2014, a major £1.2 million partnership was formed to bring together all key stakeholders in the tea industry as well as public and private partners to tackle child exploitation.

Girls are at the heart of the programme as they are most vulnerable to a range of child protection issues including abuse, forced marriage, leaving education early, and trafficking. ETP and UNICEF worked together to improve girls’ access to education and training.

We know that more needs to be done in Assam and so together we are launching a new collective commitment to lead the industry. That’s why we are also launching an industry first with a new commitment for women, children, and families in Assam.

In June 2018, the programme was significantly scaled up to build on its success. The Improving the Lives of Women and Children in Assam’s Tea Communities programme aims to improve the lives of an estimated 250,000 direct and indirect beneficiaries. It will reach more than a quarter of all tea estates in Assam and is the biggest programme of its kind there.

What the girls think about the ETP - UNICEF project

Bondona is 14 years old and wants to be a doctor when she grows up because it is something that would make herself and her whole family very happy.

She says that the Adolescent Girls’ Group has helped her to be able to communicate better with lots of different types of people. Now she feels more comfortable speaking with her elders and supporting younger girls in the group. The most important lesson that she has learnt from the club is how to be responsible for herself.

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Adolescent Girls’ Groups (AGGs). These AGGs empower girls with the confidence and knowledge they need to stay safe from exploitation. Girls also attend regular health talks and life skill classes, such as hygiene, sanitation and cooking, as well as taking part in drama and sports.

With the help of exposure visits to government services, banks, transport, and health facilities, adolescent girls are more aware of the services available and how to access them. This is also helping to build trust and understanding between communities and the police, which is often a significant barrier.

Almost 300 Child Protection Committees (CPCs) have also been formed to support child protection at the tea garden level. As well as training community members to understand the dangers of child trafficking and unsafe migration, the CPCs also intervene to demand the safe return of children engaged in exploitative labour and provide counsel to families that might be considering early marriage of their daughters.

Over the last three years, the ETP-UNICEF Partnership Programme worked with 350 communities linked to more than 100 tea communities in Assam to help give young people brighter futures and a good quality of life. As a result:

• 35,000 girls were equipped with essential skills to reduce the risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation
• 350 Adolescent Girls’ Groups (AGGs) were set up in 104 tea communities
• 300 Child Protection Committees (CPCs) formed to protect children against trafficking and unsafe migration
• 1,000 front line staff trained on child protection issues to build trust between tea communities and local agencies and keep them safe.

**Bringing together partners to accelerate change**

2018 was a very significant year to bring partners together to accelerate change. We worked closely with UNICEF to launch the Women, Children and Families in Assam commitment, an industry first, which will tackle some of the deep rooted issues facing Assam’s tea communities. Driven by Unicef and the Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP), this is a new commitment signed by ETP’s funding partners IDH, the Sustainable Trade Initiative, Starbucks Corporation, Jacobs Douwe Egberts, Tata Global Beverages, Tata Trusts, Taylor’s of Harrogate, Tesco, Typhoo and the Ostfriesische Tee Gesellschaft (OTG).

To ensure the commitment includes a wide range of key stakeholders who are involved in the tea supply chain, it has also been signed by the ITA, the oldest tea association in India who represent 60 per cent of tea production for Indian tea producers.

Unilever, and Twinings also signed the commitment. Unilever is involved in separate gender focussed programmes in Assam and Twinings has been working in partnership with UNICEF in Assam since 2010.

**Empowering Tea Communities**

The Plantation Community Empowerment Programme (PCEP) is an innovative new programmes that has been designed with a bottom up approach to ensure workers are empowered and actively identifying the changes they want to see on the most important issues for them. It is adapting a successful community-led development and decision making model from Sri Lanka and
is currently underway at four tea estates, with a population of 27,000 people.

As part of the programme, Community Development Fora (CDFs) are established on each site. The CDFs are comprised of elected representatives from the tea estate’s working and non-working population, community groups, unions, and management. Working together, these groups have drawn up Estate Development Plans that prioritise the issues they would like to address along with a plan for how to tackle them. Early indications are that this is a positive model, which we are looking forward to developing further.

**Improving wages and benefits**

ETP and Oxfam released the report *Understanding Wage Issues in the Tea Industry*. The report was the culmination of a multi-stakeholder collaboration to increase understanding about wages, benefits, and the basic needs of tea workers to enable appropriate changes to be made so that tea plantation workers are paid a decent and fair wage.

The report highlighted that estate worker wage packages are made up of a cash component and in-kind benefits. Also, tea worker wages are set at the regional or national level and not by individual companies. This means 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.

In brief, while audits show that tea producers are paying legally required wages, concerns remain about the ability of wages in some tea growing communities including Assam to cover the needs of workers and their families. Increasing worker wages is on the agenda. The last collective bargaining agreement (CBA) 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 to Rs137. The latest proposal from the Assam Government is to raise the cash part of the overall package to Rs 351. This is currently under discussion with tea producers and government, and we await the final outcome.

**Improving sanitation and housing**

Since 2016, we have been collaborating with the Indian Tea Association (ITA) and a range of other organisations in developing a multi-stakeholder roadmap for a sustainable Indian tea industry. According to the ITA, significant investment has been made in sanitation since then with the construction of an additional 5,000 sanitation units in Assam.

**Launching the India Road Map**

TEAM UP 2016 held in India led to the development of a roadmap for a sustainable and thriving Indian tea industry that benefits tea farmers, workers, and the environment. The roadmap sets clear objectives for 2020 and provides a guide for industry, governmental, and non-governmental organisations on where to focus their efforts.

**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. Improving agrochemical management is a challenge due to the incredibly humid conditions and because poor practice has been embedded for so long. Even after training, some workers may continue to spray without protective clothing although they are aware of the dangers. This is an issue we are continuing to focus on by working with estate managers to embed consistent and safe spraying. We are also looking at promoting different spraying regimes, increasing the use of non-chemical pest management systems, and exploring better protective clothing solutions. In March 2014, the Tea Board of India unveiled the Plant Protection Code (PPC), which ETP as part of the trustea verification programme 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.

To support the safe use of agrochemicals across
smallholder communities, ETP and the Tea Research Association (TRA) Tocklai developed an innovative comic-book style training manual on the safe and judicious use of agrochemicals, which is available in 3 languages (Bengali, Assamese, and English). The manual (pictured below) is aimed at farmers and their families.

**Increasing resilience to climate change**

To support the industry in developing its approach to adapt to the effects of climate change, Tata Global Beverages Ltd. (TGBL) funded a partnership between ETP and Tea Research Association (TRA) Tocklai that assessed the likely impact of climate change on tea production in Assam. Climate modelling maps (see next page) have been produced that predict how the current tea producing regions of Assam will look unless comprehensive adaptation strategies are initiated. Results of the mapping show that without intervention the four main tea growing regions of Assam (Upper Assam, South Bank, North Bank, and Cachar) will become far less suitable for tea cultivation, primarily due to changes in temperature and precipitation patterns.

Key changes predicted by the model are:
- Both minimum and maximum temperatures will increase across all the major tea growing regions of Assam, which will impact on the suitability of the region for growing tea.
- Rainfall is likely to reduce in the first quarter of the year and the amount of precipitation is likely to increase during monsoonal months.

ETP, TRA, and other partners will now work together to create industry-wide awareness about the issues, and help both large-scale producers and smallholder tea farmers (currently about 200,000) adapt to the effects of climate change. ETP’s experience of running climate change adaptation programmes in Africa should prove invaluable.