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

At the end of 2014, ETP entered into a major £1.2 million partnership with UNICEF in Assam that is working with 350 communities linked to more than 100 tea estates to help give young people brighter futures and a good quality of life.

The partnership, which brings together all key stakeholders in the tea industry as well as public and private partners to tackle child exploitation across the sector, focuses on giving girls access to education and training and has already reached more than 35,000 girls.

This has been implemented through the strengthening and setting up of more than 350 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.

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.

Almost 300 Child Protection Committees (CPCs) have also been formed to support child protection at...
Pallabi is 15 years old and wants to be a teacher when she grows up because she enjoys teaching and learning and wants to help other children feel the same.

She says she enjoys the Adolescent Girls’ Group because she has gained so much knowledge and has learnt new things.

Sonali is 16 years old and wants to be a lawyer when she leaves school. She says that a lot of people are scared to go to the police if they need help and she wants to be a lawyer to help people feel safe and confident to access police services.

She enjoys being a member of the Adolescent Girls’ Group because it provides a forum to discuss issues that affect girls. It has also provided Sonali and her friends with an avenue to explore their talents, figure out what they want to be, and how to pursue their dreams.

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.

Although we know more needs to be done, we are seeing progress on the ground. Overall, the programme has:

- Equipped more than 35,000 adolescent girls with the knowledge and life skills that will help them secure a better future and reduce their vulnerability to violence, abuse, and exploitation
- Reached 30,000 community members to protect children from all types of violence, abuse, and exploitation
- Influenced national, state and district governments to protect children and review policies affecting women and children living in tea communities

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.

Bringing together partners to accelerate change
Each year ETP hosts TEAM UP, the largest conference on tea and sustainability in the world. In 2016, TEAM UP was 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 wider communities.

The event led to the development of a roadmap for a sustainable and thriving Indian tea industry (see page 5) 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.

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.

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.
Current suitability of tea in Assam based on Maxent model.

Future suitability of tea in Assam by 2050 in RCP 2.6 IPCC Scenario.
The Roadmap for a Sustainable Indian Tea Industry

- **2016**: Establish living wage benchmark.
- **2017**: Multi-stakeholder discussions on transition to living wage.
- **2018**: Agreement on process to achieve living wage.
- **2019**: Improve access to financial services & financial literacy.
- **2020**: Workers and farmers have bank accounts.
- **2020+**: Farmers have improved cultivation practices and sustainable businesses & livelihoods.

- **Environment that supports sustainable tea production**
  - Improved use of natural resources, e.g., water, soil, fuels.
  - Climate mapping for other tea-growing regions & more detailed micro-level mapping.
  - Develop climate change resistant clones & adaptation guidance and resources.
  - Research & trials on use of alternative energy sources.
  - Engagement with govt. & stakeholders on improving forest & watershed landscapes to address CC.

- **Healthy, motivated, and productive workforce with improved opportunities for women**
  - Improve education and skills of children & youth, and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.
  - Create more career paths for the workforce & opportunities for women in particular.
  - Trial models to improve management engagement with the workforce & wider community.
  - Expand housing, sanitation, health, and nutrition programmes.

- **Profitable businesses for the 21st century**
  - Optimise yields & quality to meet market demands.
  - Marketing initiatives to attract younger consumers.
  - Optimise manufacturing, working capital, & production costs.
  - Product & processing modernisation, including mechanisation.

- **A thriving and sustainable tea industry that benefits tea workers, farmers, and the environment**
  - All tea workers paid minimum wage & process to achieve living wage implemented.
  - All tea is PFC compliant & meets food safety requirements.
  - Tea cultivation has less environmental impact & is adapted to climate change.
  - Improved management of watersheds, land, & forest.
  - Pest & disease management less reliant on agrochemicals.

- **Reformed legislation fit for a modern tea industry**
  - Production is responsive to consumer needs.
  - Pricing mechanisms reflect costs of production & sustainability performance.

- **Migration from tea communities is safe**
  - Improved opportunities for women and youth.
  - New models for tea improvement implemented.
  - Improved housing, sanitation & health conditions.
  - Govt. funds & programmes efficiently utilised on estates.