

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 the lives of women and young people in tea communities

UNICEF and ETP have been working to improve the lives of women and young people in tea communities for many years. 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. Our first programme improved the lives of 35,000 girls in Assam and won the Third Sector Big Impact award.

In 2018, we scaled up the work to a £2.4 million partnership, involving a range of public and private sector partners. Together we are reducing child marriage and unsafe migration, helping girls stay in education and equipping them with the skills to decrease the risk of violence, abuse and exploitation. We're supporting women in Assam to have healthier diets, as well as improving their sanitation facilities and the services available for new mothers.

We have also scaled up the work with adolescent girls to build on its successes and encompass adolescent boys, who are also at risk and essential to changing gender norms for the next generation. The programme is directly and indirectly improving the lives of an estimated 250,000 women, girls and boys living in Assam. Its reach spans more than a quarter of all tea estates in Assam, and it 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.

Continued next page...



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.

We know that more needs to be done in Assam and so, together with Unicef, ETP have launched a collective commitment for women, children, and families in Assam.

The programme 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.

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.

Together with UNICEF, we make young people safer and improve their lives through:

- Girls and Boys groups that empower young people with the confidence and knowledge to stay safe from exploitation and to pursue their full potential.
- Child Protection Committees that support community members to:

- understand the dangers of child trafficking and unsafe migration
- demand the safe return of children engaged in exploitative labour
- reconsider child marriage of their daughters.

- Work with state and district government to improve the quality of education and the effectiveness of child protection systems to help make a difference to the lives of children now and in many years to come.
- Improving services for mothers and new-born babies by connecting tea estate hospitals to government healthcare, and supporting mothers to breastfeed to improve the health of their new-borns.
- Improving nutrition through community work that promotes varied diets and training workers in the community to identify malnutrition.
- Developing sanitation facilities that women and girls can easily access. This improves their day to day lives and will help prevent diseases and improve menstrual hygiene, which is linked to improved school attendance for girls.
- Encouraging greater commitment to education by training teachers on child-friendly teaching practises and digital technology, improving the likelihood of children staying in school.

Bringing together partners to accelerate change

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 provides a guide for industry, governmental, and non-governmental organisations on where to focus their efforts, so that together sufficient change is made.

In 2018, 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 in India.

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

In Assam, we are leading a ground-breaking project called the Community Empowerment Programme. The initiative's goal is that communities and estate management jointly resolve issues, so that living and working conditions on tea estates in Assam are improved.

This is an innovative grassroots programme, working directly with tea communities to give them a forum to voice their own concerns, alongside estate managers. It supports them to create and deliver their own action plans to tackle the challenges they themselves have identified in the communities they live in.

The groups are known as Community Development Forums (CDFs) and made up of people from all aspects of tea estate life – from workers, young people and anyone who lives or works in the estate to management.

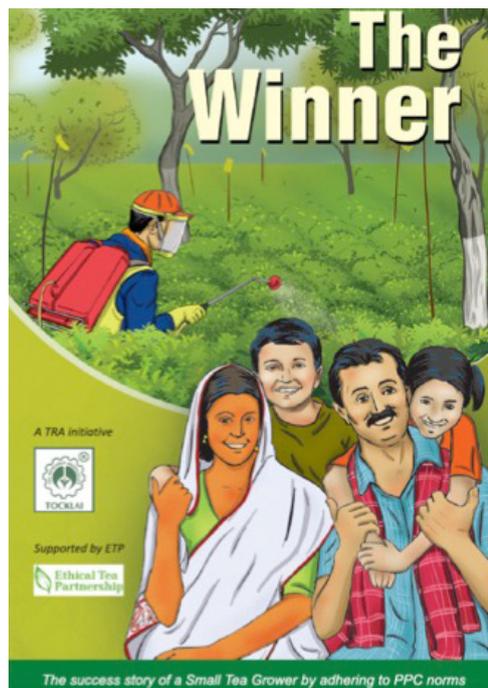
The CDFs address issues that workers themselves have identified as important to them. So far these have included lack of employment opportunities for women and young people, alcoholism, challenges accessing government schemes and improving children's results at school. While issues may be shared across estates, responses are determined and rolled out by the individual CDFs.

This has helped

- 1200 people obtain documents to open bank accounts which helps workers save additional money
- 400 people have been able to access a

government-backed LPG subsidy

- 480 households have been able to access the documentation they need to take part in the government's LED bulb distribution scheme.



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

There is the need for fundamental reform of the wages and benefits system in India and this is on the agenda. Cash wages were raised from Rs95 to Rs115 per day in 2015. At the start of 2016 this

was raised to Rs126 and in 2017 to Rs137. In 2017, the Assam Government set up a Minimum Wage Advisory Board. Negotiations are currently underway to set a minimum wage in the tea industry, with the current suggestion of Rs350 per day. Discussions continue on the implications of this level of rise in the cash wage and who has responsibility for the range of non-cash benefits that the tea producers are currently responsible for under the terms of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA).

In June 2018, the industry agreed to pay an additional sum to workers while the negotiations continued and workers in the Brahmaputra Valley, the main producing tea area in Assam, are now receiving Rs167. Additional schemes to help tea workers access other benefits, such as a wage compensation scheme for pregnant women in tea estates, have been announced by the government. ETP will continue to use the influence we have to support improvements on wages and benefits and hope that a living wage will be achieved in the future.

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 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.

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.

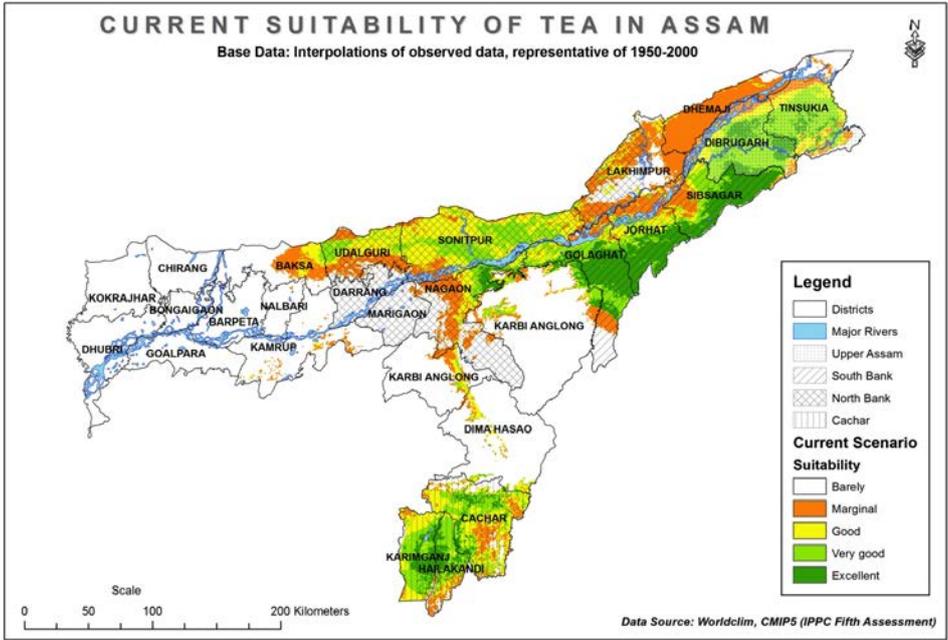
Increasing resilience to climate change

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.

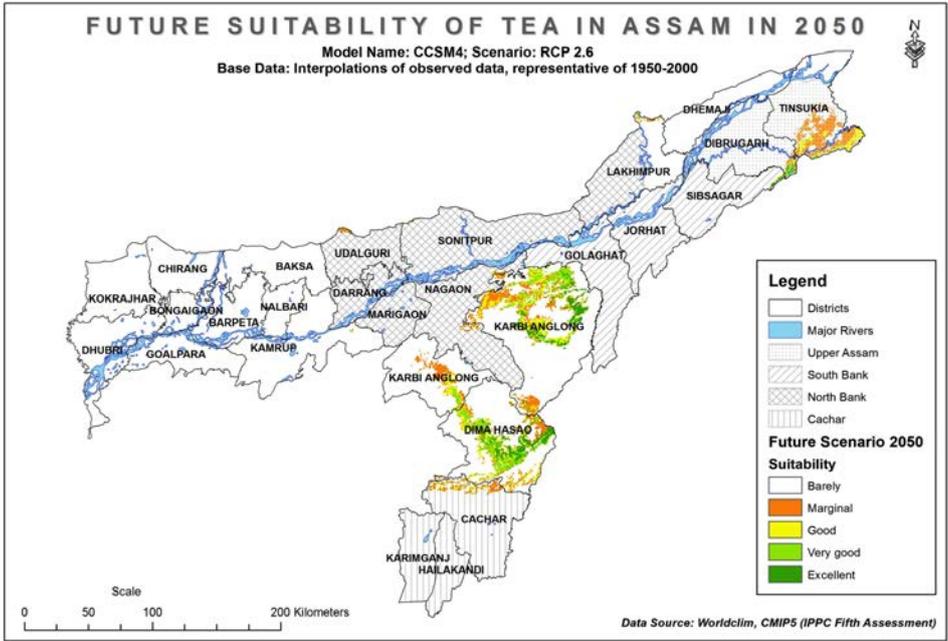
Key changes predicted by the model are:

- 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

