

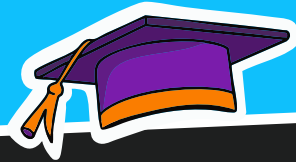


LINNER RUTO, TEA FARMER,
FINTEA GROWERS CO-OPERATIVE, KENYA.

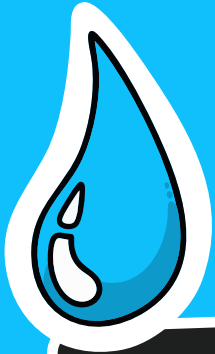


**CREATING A
FAIRER FUTURE
FOR THE PEOPLE
BEHIND THE TEA
WE DRINK**

**Fairtrade
Foundation
May 2025**



TEA HAS THE POTENTIAL TO CONTRIBUTE TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND WATER ACCESS, IMPROVE EDUCATION OUTCOMES, EMPOWER WOMEN AND – ULTIMATELY – CHANGE LIVES.



IN THE UK WE DRINK 100 MILLION CUPS OF TEA EVERY DAY.



SMALLHOLDER FARMERS PRODUCE AROUND 60% OF THE WORLD'S TEA.

TEA PROVIDES WORK FOR AN ESTIMATED 13 MILLION PEOPLE GLOBALLY.



ONLY 1 IN 5 TEA WORKERS AND TEA FARMERS SURVEYED* SAID THEY EARN ENOUGH INCOME EVERY MONTH TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES WITH THE ESSENTIALS.

***2025 Fairtrade survey**



THE PRICE OF AN AVERAGE TEA BAG TODAY IS AROUND JUST TWO OR THREE PENCE.

“

FAIRTRADE ISN'T JUST A CERTIFICATION, IT'S A PROMISE FOR OUR COMMUNITY, WORKERS AND ENVIRONMENT.”

D.D Preetham, General Manager of Chamraj Estate, Nilgiris District, India.

WITH THE WORLD IN A TAILSPIN, FAIRNESS IN THE TEA INDUSTRY ISN'T A GIVEN.

BUT THE POWER TO GET THERE IS IN OUR HANDS.

Tea is the world's most popular drink (apart from water). In Britain alone, we drink over 100 million cups of tea every day. When most of us think of a cup of tea, we think of comfort, warmth, taking a break or catching up with loved ones. What we are less likely to think about is the journey the tea we drink has been on, the people who have carefully picked the tea leaves – carrying up to 30 kilograms on their backs at a time – and what their days look like.

Growing up in Kenya, I have always been in awe of the people growing the tea we drink especially the sheer determination of the women who face some of the toughest working conditions of any sector. Sadly, this has not improved over the years.

The people growing our tea deserve to be able to live with dignity. To be safe at work and to earn enough money to pay for food for their families and send their children to school. When I drink a cup of tea with the women in my village, I want to know that the woman picking that tea has worked in a safe environment and has been paid a fair wage.

This is why Fairtrade has launched its 'Brew it Fair' campaign. We need transformational change in the tea sector, with tea workers, industry, governments and NGOs working together so that the people behind the tea we drink can live decent lives. At Fairtrade, we will also be evolving our work on tea, so we can take our own impact to scale.

For me, tea speaks to so much of what is going on in the world right now. The power imbalances and growing inequalities, the lack of transparency and accountability, and the cuts to vital funding that should support the most vulnerable. The role of trade and how we treat the people behind the everyday things that we rely on has perhaps never been more central to rebalancing the world we all share.

With support from passionate campaigners and Fairtrade advocates – and working alongside the people who grow and pick the tea we drink as well as tea brands and retailers – we have a unique opportunity to restore that balance as a collective movement. This report is a rallying call for greater action and collaboration to bring the changes that are so urgently needed in the tea sector.

Together, we can all be part of changing the future with the people behind the tea we all drink.



Dr. Nyagoy Nyong'o
Fairtrade Foundation's
Chair of Trustees.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The comfort of a cup of tea connects people of all backgrounds across the UK. From the ritual of an afternoon tea to the simplicity of a builder's brew, the Great British Cuppa is a longstanding part of our national identity.

But one thing has changed since tea first arrived in the UK – it is no longer a luxury item. As tea drinkers, we are now used to paying very little for, and putting little value on, our cup of tea. The price of an average tea bag today is around just two or three pence,¹ but behind that cup, the cost to grow and pick the tea we drink is increasing.

Despite the joy a cup of tea brings us in the UK, the value we place on the tea we drink means families in tea growing communities across the world are facing huge challenges that most tea drinkers are unaware of. This situation can – and must – change.

Evolving from a grassroots movement to the most globally recognised and trusted ethical label, Fairtrade was set up to provide support and solidarity to the people across the world who grow the products we rely on every day. The Fairtrade movement has achieved important impact over the years, supporting over 330,000 people in tea growing communities across 11 countries to address their biggest challenges. Fairtrade tea farmers and workers have earned £50 million in Fairtrade Premium through sales of Fairtrade tea in the UK over the last 30 years. Today, the UK accounts for 61% of all Fairtrade tea sold across the world.

Fairtrade has revolutionised the way we think about our shopping and the goods we consume but recognises that a systemic approach is needed to scale impact for the people who grow and pick the tea we drink.

Tea is drunk in more than 50 nations and grown in 36 countries. Tea has become a massive global employer, providing work for an estimated 13 million people. Tea has the potential to contribute to rural development (including water access), improve education outcomes, empower women and – ultimately – change lives.² Realising this ripple-effect potential will require businesses, government and civil society to work together, putting the voices of the pickers and growers behind the tea we drink at the centre of debates and policy decisions that impact their future.

Today, the tea industry has many complex and deeply entrenched issues, driven by an unequal trading system

where the power remains in the hands of the few. And it will require a collective effort to change the future with the people behind Britain's favourite drink.

A small number of companies dominate the tea industry from crop to cup. But, despite high levels of unstable work, low incomes and wages, gender discrimination and unsafe working conditions, most businesses are still not taking responsibility for the impact their purchasing practices have on the people in their supply chains. Urgent action is needed to support the people at the end of these supply chains so they can create positive change for themselves, their communities and our shared environment.

The UK government has committed to protecting and respecting human rights and environmental standards, for example, through endorsing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), passing The Modern Slavery Act of 2015 and promising to “promote the highest standards when it comes to food production” in the 2024 Labour Party Manifesto.³ They have also made a range of pledges to improve the lives of agricultural workers and support adaptation to climate change, such as committing to spending £11.6bn on climate finance by 2025–2026. However, wages, incomes and working conditions remain woefully inadequate for the majority of the people growing, plucking and producing the tea we drink.

And what role can UK tea drinkers play in a huge global industry? In recent years, we have come to understand just how connected we are and how much we rely on each other – globally. All of us deserve to be able to live safe, fulfilling lives and look after our families.

The simple act of choosing Fairtrade tea has a significant impact on the people behind the product. And, while this action alone will not address all of the challenges that the people behind the tea we drink face, we must never underestimate the power we hold as consumers and as citizens who can encourage the UK government to take action and push for changes that hold businesses accountable.

This report aims to:

- Provide an overview of the reality for tea workers today.
- Share the views of the people who grow and pick our tea in Kenya.
- Make recommendations for how we can all play a part in making the trade system fairer, so the people behind the tea we drink can live decent lives.

¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/cznq/mm23> (accessed 7th April 2025)

²Food & Agricultural Organization, Tea: A Resilient Sector, Available at: <https://www.fao.org/markets-and-trade/commodities-overview/beverages/tea/tea-a-resilient-sector> (accessed 7th April 2025)

³Labour Party (2024) Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf> (accessed 7th April 2025)



**MRS SONI MUNDA, TEA PLUCKER,
THE UNITED NILGIRI TEA ESTATES, INDIA.**

Fairtrade is calling on the UK government to:

- Introduce a UK law on human rights and environmental due diligence which is centred on the needs of farmers and workers.
- Support multistakeholder collaboration in 2025 to address challenges and build progress towards living incomes and living wages in the tea sector, including convening a roundtable with all stakeholders.
- Honour the UK's International Climate Finance commitment and restore the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget to 0.5% of Gross National Income (GNI) in both 2025 and 2026.

Fairtrade is calling on tea buyers, brands and retailers to prioritise the following:

- Transparency in their tea supply chain.
- Continuous improvement through human rights and environmental due diligence.
- Implementation of sustainable purchasing practices.
- Working together in collaboration and at scale.

Fairtrade is calling on the UK public to:

- Ask the UK government to ensure the people growing the tea we drink can plan for their futures and are protected from the impacts of climate change.
- Buy Fairtrade tea and help to ensure more tea workers and farmers get a better deal.



INTRODUCTION:

SPILLING THE TEA ON TEA



When tea first arrived from China in the mid-17th century, it was so expensive that only royalty and the very wealthy could afford it. But, by the 1800s, the popularity of the drink had grown, with British colonies established in India, Sri Lanka and East Africa to meet the increasing demand. Today, tea is the most popular beverage in the world, apart from water.

This increase in demand required an increase in production and workforce. As this once-luxury commodity grew in popularity and became the huge global industry it is today, it has also driven the exploitation of the people who grow and pick its leaves. When the British began growing tea in Assam, there were not enough local workers to run the plantations or estates, and workers were recruited from central India under a system of indentured labour that has been compared to slavery. Today, these workers can often remain entirely dependent on their management for housing, healthcare, education, sanitation, and even food (see page 13).

Precious tea leaves are grown in two ways. The first is on large traditional estates or plantations. These estates employ hundreds of workers and cover the whole process from growing tea, harvesting the leaves and processing them in factories. The second is by farmers on their own land, often operating as family businesses, sometimes employing a few workers. These smallholder farmers produce around 60% of the world's tea.⁴

But the people that pick and grow the tea we drink face numerous challenges including poverty, dangerous working conditions, and gender-based violence and harassment – all exacerbated by a lack of bargaining power and our rapidly changing climate.

In this report, we look at how the tea sector, government and consumers are contributing to the reality for the people growing the tea we drink. We then put forward an ambitious agenda for change to ensure the people growing the tea we drink can thrive in the future.

ONLY 1 IN 5 KENYANS WORKING IN TEA EARN ENOUGH INCOME EVERY MONTH TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES WITH THE ESSENTIALS.

Source: Fairtrade Foundation / Fairtrade Africa survey of over 250 people in Kenyan tea growing communities.



WILITER CHEPNGENO, TEA FARMER,
KAPKOROS TEA FACTORY, KENYA.

⁴ Bolton, D. (2022). FAO: Tea industry can transform agri-food globally. STiR. <https://stir-teacoffee.com/api/content/e05199f8-9927-11ec-8254-12f1225286c6/>

CHAPTER 1:

THE STORM IN OUR TEA CUP

Kenya's tea industry is the third largest in the world, and acts as one of the largest sources of livelihood, indirectly supporting millions of Kenya's citizens.

In March 2025, Fairtrade Foundation and Fairtrade Africa carried out research with over 260 people in Kenya who grow and pick the tea we drink. They shared that their biggest challenges right now are having enough money to support their families and the increasing impacts of the changing climate.

For young people in particular, the climate crisis is their biggest concern, worsened by not having the money to mitigate or respond to its impacts.

But the people we spoke to also told us that, when they are able to take back power and choose how to invest, the results can be transformative. This positive change then ripples outwards across their communities.

“

**I AM URGING
TEA DRINKERS
TO CONTINUE
BUYING OUR TEA,
BECAUSE WE GET
MORE PREMIUMS
WHICH BOOST
US IN OUR LIVING
AND CONTINUE
TO SUPPORT OUR
CHILDREN THROUGH
SCHOLARSHIPS.”**

Kenya tea grower, 2025

Conclusions from Kenya:

ONLY 1 IN 5

of the tea workers and tea farmers surveyed said they earn enough income every month to support their families with the essentials.

OVER 70%

of tea workers said their biggest challenge is wages. Many, particularly women, mentioned they had not received wage increases or promotions after years of work and struggled to meet costs for their families, including education for their children.

50%

of the younger tea workers surveyed said the impacts of climate change on tea production is their biggest challenge, seeing the impact this will have on their ability to make money from working in tea in the future.

55%

of tea farmers said their biggest challenge is changing weather patterns on their farms, raising costs and impacting their ability to maintain an adequate income from their farms.

99%

of both tea workers and tea farmers surveyed said that Fairtrade Premium* has been spent on projects that address their main challenges including education and healthcare, community improvements such as schools and roads and additional projects to make extra money such as beekeeping and growing other crops.

This research with over 260 Kenyan tea pickers and growers in March 2025 was gathered through 'FairVoice', a tool developed by Fairtrade which allows farmers and workers to share their experiences directly with us through their mobile devices.

*Fairtrade Premium is the amount a farmer earns on top of the Fairtrade Minimum Price for their tea. It will be spent wherever the organisation votes they need it most.

GACHARAGE TEA FACTORY, KENYA



KENNEDY MWANGI NJOROGE, TEA FARMER
WITH AVOCADOS THAT BRING IN FURTHER
INCOME. GACHARAGE TEA FACTORY, KENYA.

Gacharage Tea Factory is a small producer organisation to the north of Nairobi in Kenya that is 100% owned by small-scale farmers and led by a board of directors who are democratically elected by the tea farmers.

The group has been Fairtrade-certified since 2006 and, since then, has been committed to creating high quality tea, while taking care of over 5,000 farmers and their families. Recently, the Gacharage Tea Factory has spent their Fairtrade Premium on supporting farmers to diversify into avocado and dairy farming to supplement their income. They have also addressed waterborne diseases by bringing in clean water and water storage to schools and communities.

Education is another priority for the Tea Factory and its community. Fairtrade Premium has been spent on upgrading the local school, and on student scholarships. Jacky Wangari – a Gacharage Tea Farmer and Premium Committee member – said: "We have about nine students enjoying full scholarships through Fairtrade funds... [with] two of them working; one is a teacher and the other one is doing a business in town. If Fairtrade was not there, these bright students in need would not have joined campus."

“

**THE FUTURE
LOOKS BRIGHT
FOR THESE YOUNG
AND BRILLIANT
KENYANS.”**

Jacky Wangari, Tea Farmer and
Gacharage Premium Committee
member, Kenya.

THE TEA SUPPLY CHAIN

The tea supply chain is complex with growers, pickers, processors, auctions, wholesalers, packers, distributors and retailers all playing a role in delivering the tea we drink.

Freshly plucked green leaves must be processed within a few hours of being picked or they lose their quality and value. Large tea estates often have their own processing plant or are located near a tea factory where tea processing is carried out. But, for farmers who do not have direct relationships with factories, they may rely on intermediaries who pay them a lower price for their harvest.

It is only once tea moves through this complex supply chain that a profit starts to be seen. According to Oxfam, out of every kilogram of packaged Assam tea that is sold, tea brands and supermarkets take a sizeable cut – up to 95% in some cases – while a tiny proportion (less than 5%) remains with tea estates, from which they pay their workers.⁵

Like any global commodity, the price of tea fluctuates, varies from market to market, and will often depend upon the quality of the tea. But a general trend is clear: tea prices have remained relatively flat, while tea production outstrips demand.⁶

According to data issued by the London-based International Trade Centre, tea production continues to steadily increase year on year and stands at 6.604 million metric tonnes, up by 26% over the past ten years. At the same time, consumption of tea continues to lag, with

2023 consumption estimated at 6.212 million tonnes. That equates to a gap of 392,000 tonnes between supply and demand – equivalent to about four times the volume of tea consumed in the US in 2023. The latest provisional data shows that this gap between world tea supply and world tea consumption was the highest ever in 2023.⁷

“

THE MAIN CHALLENGE OF TEA FARMERS TODAY IS FLUCTUATING PRICES. TEA PRICES INTERNATIONALLY HAVE REMAINED AT AROUND \$2 FOR QUITE A LONG TIME. IT IS NOT GOING UP, YET THE COST OF PRODUCTION HAS BEEN GOING UP EVERY YEAR, TIME AND AGAIN.”

Erastus Ndumia, Factory Manager and Fairtrade Premium Co-ordinator at Nduti Tea Factory, Kenya.

7 CHALLENGES IN THE TEA INDUSTRY

WAGES AND INCOME

LIVING CONDITIONS

HEALTH AND WORKING CONDITIONS

GENDER INEQUALITY



LABOUR RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

THE SAFETY OF WOMEN

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

⁵Addressing the human cost of Assam tea: An agenda for change to respect, protect and fulfil human rights on Assam tea plantations, OXFAM briefing paper – October 2019

⁶World Bank Group (2024) Commodity Markets Outlook, A World bank Group Report, April. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/9e84a1ca-8a6b-45c1-8693-01edc068408d/content> (accessed 7th April 2025)

⁷The Global Tea Report 2024 - Tea & Coffee Trade Journal: <https://www.teaandcoffee.net/feature/34254/the-global-tea-report-2024/>

WAGES AND INCOMES

A living wage or income is the money received for a standard work week (for a worker) or for a household in a particular area (for a farmer) to afford a decent standard of living. Elements of a decent standard of living include the ability to feed your family, access to water, education and healthcare, as well as safe housing, transport, clothing, and other essential needs, including the ability to deal with unexpected events.

The tea sector is an important source of income and livelihoods in many countries, contributing to economic growth and food security. However, most workers picking tea on estates earn significantly below what is considered a 'living wage' and, in many cases, they earn their pay below the poverty line. These wages are insufficient for maintaining a decent standard of living, contributing to malnutrition, child labour and forced labour in tea picking regions.

Tea pickers are often paid based on how much tea they have plucked, opening them up to discrimination. Quotas can be raised to keep labour costs down and in some cases mechanisation is replacing established processes as a cheaper and faster way to process tea. Workers may also be offered in-kind benefits such as housing, medicine and transport as part of their wage packet. This makes them heavily reliant on their employer for so many aspects of their daily life, with limited means to change their future. In some countries, wages for workers are determined by legal minimums set by governments, but they can exceed this where trade unions engage in collective bargaining.

Tea estate workers in India, Kenya and Sri Lanka are often migrants or the descendants of immigrants who came to work in the tea industry during the colonial era. They often face ethnic violence and discrimination.⁸

⁸Thirst (2022) Human Rights in the Tea Sector - The Big Picture. Available at: https://thirst.international/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/THIRST_HRIA_Lit_Review_Final.pdf

⁹Fairtrade endorses the use of Anker benchmarks where available. The Assam benchmark is under development by the Anker Research Institute and in this interim period the government-appointed Satpathy Committee calculated a figure in 2019 which, uprated for inflation, would be approximately INR 454 per day. Report of the Expert Committee on Determining the Methodology for Fixing the National Minimum Wage, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, January 2019; Inflation calculated at: <https://www.inflationtool.com/indian-rupee/2018-to-present-value>

¹⁰Multiple sources. Ethical Tea Partnership (2024) Wage Hike for Sri Lanka's Tea Workers, September. Available at: <https://etp-global.org/news/wage-hike-for-sri-lankas-tea-workers/> (Accessed 7th April 2025); Global Living Wage Coalition (no date) Living Wage Estimate for Sri Lanka. Available at: <https://globallivingwage.org/countries/sri-lanka/>

How much are tea workers paid?

- In Assam, which produces half of India's tea, the minimum wage for workers is **250 rupees per day** (around £2.50). A living wage would be about **450 rupees a day** (£4.50).⁹
- In Sri Lanka, the legal minimum wage for workers in tea has been set at **1,350 rupees per day** (£3.60) following a recent increase that places tea workers' minimum wage rates among the highest in the country. However, it is still below the living wage, which is around **1,868.60 rupees per day** (£4.98).¹⁰



MS ANJALI AND MS JUNALI, TEA WORKERS COLLECTING FIREWOOD AT CHAMONG TEA EXPORTS IN ASSAM, INDIA.

IN TAMIL NADU IN SOUTHERN INDIA, DALIT¹¹ WORKERS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY KEPT IN CASUAL AND TEMPORARY JOBS, WHERE THEY DO NOT RECEIVE BENEFITS SUCH AS HOUSING, MEDICAL CARE OR BONUSES.¹²



IN KENYA, TRIBAL AFFILIATIONS AND PHYSICAL ABILITIES OF FEMALE TEA WORKERS CAN DETERMINE THEIR EXPERIENCE IN THE TEA ESTATES AND WHICH TASKS THEY ARE ASKED TO CARRY OUT.¹⁴



FOR HALF A CENTURY AFTER INDEPENDENCE UNTIL 2003, SRI LANKA'S TEA ESTATE WORKERS WERE EXCLUDED FROM CITIZENSHIP.¹³



There is much less information about the incomes of smallholder tea farmers. We do know, however, that unfair purchasing practices focused on maximising profits further up the supply chain encourage poor employment practices aimed at lowering the costs of production. This results in low incomes, preventing tea growers with their own land from investing in and developing their farms, fuelling a vicious cycle of low productivity and declining incomes.

As evidenced in our Kenyan research, increasingly unpredictable weather patterns are also creating huge challenges for smallholder farmers whose income is too low to manage the impacts on their farms.

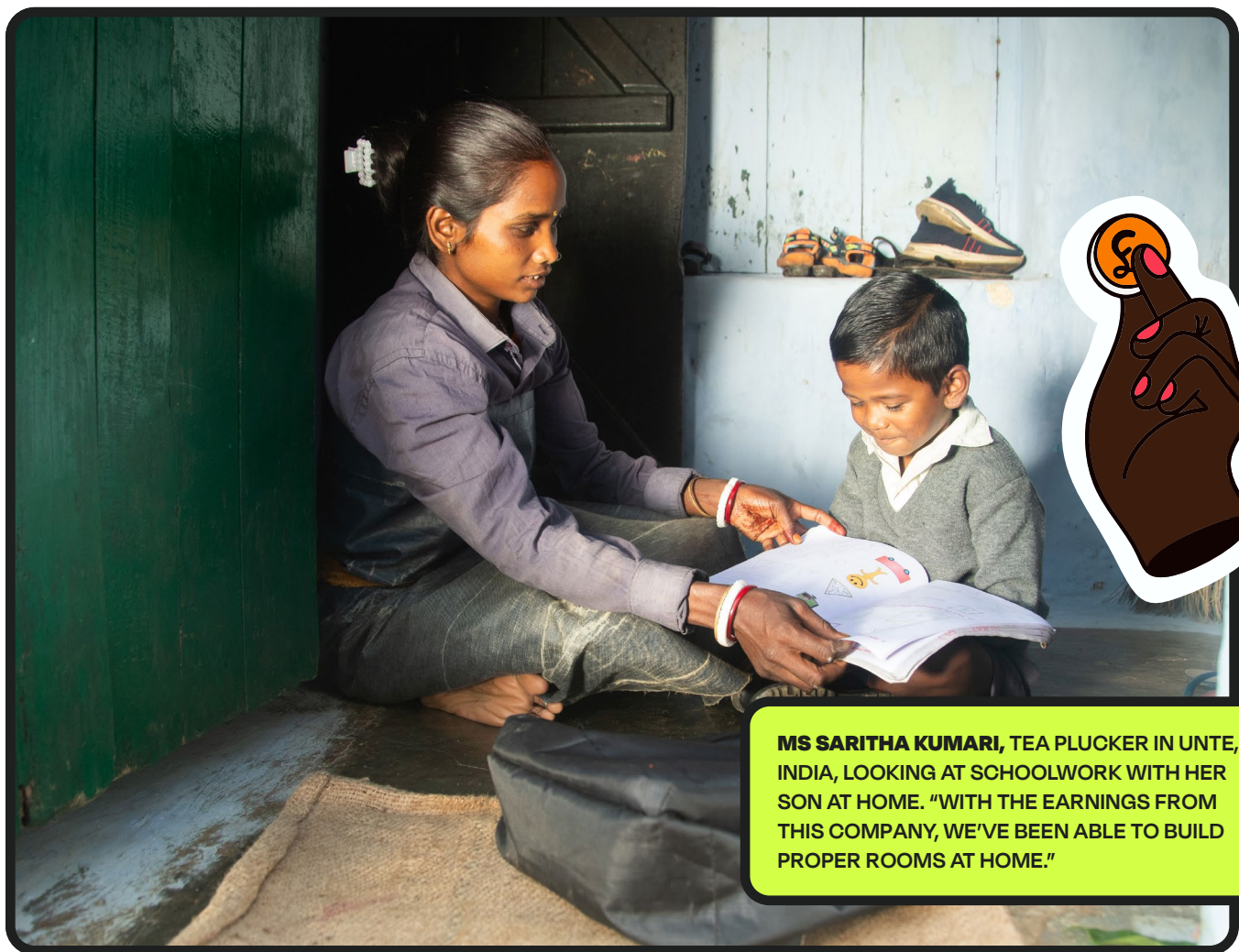
Making progress towards achieving living wages and living incomes in the tea sector is essential for improving the lives of tea workers, tea farmers and their families.

¹¹Dalits are the community previously referred to as 'untouchables'; untouchability was abolished when the Indian constitution came into force in 1950, but Dalits continue to experience discrimination. See <https://dsnuk.org/>

¹²Raj, Jayaseelan (2022) Plantation Crisis: Ruptures of Dalit life in the Indian tea belt, London UCL Press. Available at: <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10150970/> (accessed 7th April 2025)

¹³Wijetunga, Chetani Priyanga (2004), Sri Lanka makes citizens out of stateless tea pickers, October, UNHCR. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/feature-sri-lanka-makes-citizens-out-stateless-tea-pickers> (accessed 7th April 2025)

¹⁴Oxfam (2025) Tea leaves a mark: The voice of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya's tea estates, March. Available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/tea-leaves-a-mark-the-voice-of-survivors-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-621689/> (Accessed 7th April 2025)



MS SARITHA KUMARI, TEA PLUCKER IN UNTE, INDIA, LOOKING AT SCHOOLWORK WITH HER SON AT HOME. "WITH THE EARNINGS FROM THIS COMPANY, WE'VE BEEN ABLE TO BUILD PROPER ROOMS AT HOME."

LIVING CONDITIONS

Low standards of health, nutrition and social security are commonplace on tea estates – often caused by their remote location from healthcare facilities.

On large estates in South Asia, workers and their families often depend upon the estate management for food, healthcare, education, housing and medical care. These may be a legal obligation, but workers have very little control over the quality and quantity of these benefits. Frequently, these legal obligations are not fulfilled and there are shortfalls in housing and basic sanitation provision on many tea estates, and a severe backlog of repairs. Water supplies, sanitation facilities, and estate hospitals are also often run down.

A study on the living conditions on tea estates in Sylhet, Bangladesh, found that 55% of households use open space toilets and only 30% of tea estates provide sanitary toilets,¹⁵ with consequential infections such as hookworm.¹⁶ Asbestos roofing has also been found in workers' housing in Bangladesh, with associated health risks of

asbestos-related diseases.¹⁷ In Assam, diseases such as Chronic Pulmonary Aspergillosis (CPA) – a fungal lung infection often caused by mouldy and poorly ventilated living conditions – have been found to be prevalent in tea growing regions.¹⁸ Living conditions in Assam are particularly challenging.

¹⁵Ahmad I. and Yasin M., 2015, Study on Socio-Economic and Educational condition of Tea Worker at Sylhet in Bangladesh, Journal of Tea Science Research, 5(5), 4 (doi: 10.5376/jtsr.2015.05.0005)

¹⁶D. D. Gilgen, C. G. N. C. G. N. Mascie-Taylor, L. L. Rosetta (2001) Intestinal helminth infections, anaemia and labour productivity of female tea pluckers in Bangladesh, Tropical Medicine & International Health, 6:6 p 449-4

¹⁷Deshwara, Mintu (2017) Tea Workers at cancer risk, The Daily Star, 14th April. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/tea-workers-cancer-risk-1390978> (accessed 7th April 2025)

¹⁸Selvasekhar A, Nath R, Gogoi G, Borah P (2025) Chronic pulmonary aspergillosis in tea population of Assam. PLoS Negl Trop Dis 19(1): e0012756. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0012756>

ASSAM: THE NEED FOR A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

More than half of the tea grown in India comes from one single state, Assam – a remote region in northern India, where most tea is produced on large estates and is picked by employed workers. In Assam, there are around 762 estates and 123,177 smallholder tea growers.¹⁹ Tea from this state is prized for its strong, robust and distinctive flavours and forms an essential ingredient in tea blends sold by many UK retailers and brands.

Assam is very important for the future of tea. Millions of people there depend upon tea for their livelihood, education and healthcare. However, the situation in Assam is challenging:

- Many people face chronic poverty and poor living and working conditions, with low cash wages. If you are a worker on a farm in Assam, it is unlikely there are any other employment options for you in the surrounding area.
- The area has seen increasing costs of production and low market prices.
- Gender-based violence, child labour and discrimination persist.
- Tea plantations and estates – first set up in the mid-19th century when the British government deforested land for tea production – still have unequal power structures at their core.
- Increasingly erratic climates are adding pressure on the region and threatening the suitability of the entire state for growing tea.²⁰

In Assam, the systemic change that is needed can only be brought about by the Indian government. Nevertheless, a range of other stakeholders in the tea sector can also make a positive contribution to this change by addressing their influence on wages and working conditions.

A multistakeholder approach, with support from the UK government, would begin to address some of the challenges facing the tea industry. Fairtrade's approach to sourcing tea in the Assam region is an attempt to address some of these challenges.

At Fairtrade, we recognise the unique challenges of working in Assam. We started working with producers there more than 20 years ago, and we remain committed to working with producers to improve the lives and living conditions for workers.²¹



¹⁹Tea Board of India Baseline Survey conducted 31st March 2022. Available at: https://teaboard.gov.in/pdf/STATE_WISE_TEA_GROWERS_AND_TEA_AREA_pdf7864.pdf (accessed 7th April 2025)

²⁰World Bank (2023) Assam Integrated River Basin Management Program, Climate Change Technical Note, World Bank Task Team, January. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099307303292335604/pdf/IDU0a9a7774208020b3fa0eb1485d1fe25.pdf> (accessed 7th April 2025)

²¹Fairtrade Sourcing in Assam: <https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/tea/>

HEALTH AND WORKING CONDITIONS

The production of tea often fails to take place within the 'safe and healthy working environment' identified in the International Labour Organization's five fundamental rights at work,²² with tea workers and farmers facing several unique health and safety challenges.

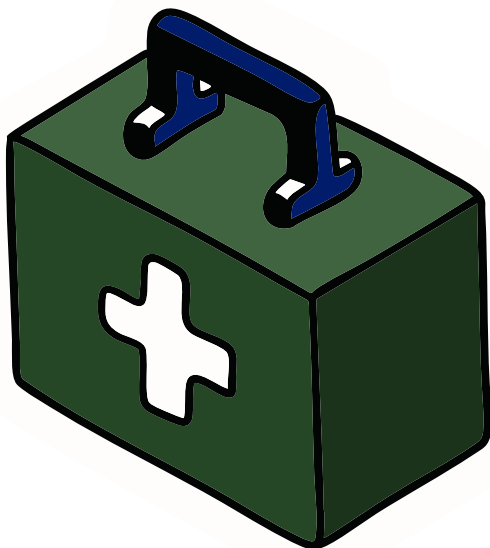
Tea cultivation is labour-intensive. Workers must walk long distances between the collection point and where they pluck tea, frequently carrying up to 30 kilograms or more of green leaf tea over uneven, slippery and sometimes steep terrain. Pickers need to navigate crossing large drainage ditches that surround tea gardens to get into their place of work with no safe crossing nearby.

Snakes, parasites and other hazards are common in many tea growing regions. The lack of protective clothing and control measures can expose pickers and factory workers to risks from agrochemical use²³, dangerous moving machinery and high levels of noise and heat.

In addition, according to the global organisation of trade unions for estate workers, women's occupational health and safety is not given enough attention – or ignored completely.²⁴ One example is the practice of basing safe limits for the exposure of chemicals and dust only on male workers.²⁵



**MS VIJAYA KUMARI, TEA
PLUCKER, MATHESON ESTATE,
SOUTH INDIA.**



²²ILO fundamental rights at work are: 1. freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; 2. the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; 3. the effective abolition of child labour; 4. the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation; and 5. a safe and healthy working environment

²³Gutgesell RM, Tsakiridis EE, Jamshed S, Steinberg GR, Holloway AC. (2020) Impact of pesticide exposure on adipose tissue development and function. *Biochem J.* 2020 Jul 31;477(14):2639-2653. doi: 10.1042/BCJ20200324. PMID: 32726435. Also Shekhar C, Khosya R, Thakur K, Mahajan D, Kumar R, Kumar S, Sharma AK. A systematic review of pesticide exposure, associated risks, and long-term human health impacts. *Toxicol Rep.* 2024 Nov 30;13:101840. doi: 10.1016/j.toxrep.2024.101840. PMID: 39717852; PMCID: PMC11664077

²⁴International Union of Foodworkers (2020), Making women visible in occupational health and safety, IUF. Available: <https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/3.-Making-women-visible-in-OHS-ENGLISH-def.pdf> (accessed 7th April 2025)

²⁵Occupational exposure limits (OELs) are developed for chemicals and dust sand, and can be expressed in parts per million, or micrograms per cubic metre, depending on the substance. They are theoretically the limit below which workers health should be unaffected. They are usually based on American males



GRACE NJOKI,
TEA FARMER, NDUTI
TEA FACTORY, KENYA.

LABOUR RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

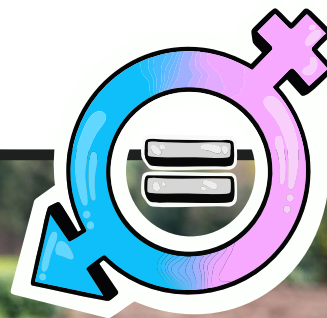
The people who grow, pick and process tea face a host of challenges in guaranteeing their fundamental rights at work (as set out by the ILO – see footnote 22) and in accessing the decent living conditions that they and their families are dependent on their employer to provide.

The right to freedom of association covers organised and professional organisations – such as trade unions – supporting working people to seek and receive resources, and to organise collectively to protect their human rights at work. Freedom of association for tea producers can help address some of the persistent human rights violations that exist in its supply chain. This is particularly important for women, who are often in casual rather than formal roles, and therefore excluded from representation. In many tea-growing regions, the effectiveness of unions varies. Where trade unions are able to engage in effective collective bargaining, wages can exceed the legal minimum.

According to the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, when people face human rights challenges, they should have the right to redressal (a forum where their complaint can be heard, and a proper response given). However, in many tea producing countries, this is not the case. There are often very few opportunities for work outside tea estates. The fear of losing their job, home and other benefits might mean that union bargaining agreements negotiated at national or regional levels are not effectively enforced.

Stronger trade unions and better industrial relations would assist workers to access more effective grievance mechanisms.

GENDER INEQUALITY



RAHAB NJERI GICHEHA, TEA FARMER WHO HAS SEEN A POSITIVE SHIFT IN GENDER BALANCE AND MORE EQUAL PAY SINCE WORKING WITH FAIRTRADE, GACHARAGE TEA FACTORY, KENYA.

Work on tea estates and smallholder farms is highly gendered. Supervisors are usually male and, in many countries, more than half of all tea workers or farmers are women.²⁶ Often, women work in the labour-intensive, less stable and lower-paid roles. But these roles are also the 'revenue generating' activities like plucking, where in some cases they are performing 80% of the work. Women generally earn less than men due to the roles they perform. However, reliable data about the gender pay gap in the tea industry is hard to find. One study of three countries found that women working in tea earned less than men in every case.

Women also face gender-based violence and discrimination, and exclusion from both decision-making and union representation. The occupational health and safety issues faced by women workers are generally ignored. Meanwhile, women in the tea sector still take responsibility for domestic work and childcare – on top of working full-time, labour-intensive jobs.

On tea farms, it is common for women to do most of the work, but the land is often owned by men, who hold the 'grower account' and are paid for the tea. As the landowner, men are also the ones who qualify to be a member of any small producer organisation, while women have no say in decision making or how the money received gets spent.

Tea growing areas are often located far away from health centres or hospitals, which creates difficulties for pregnant women seeking medical care and leads to more women delivering babies at home. This increases their risk of postpartum haemorrhage – the leading cause of global maternal mortality.

However, tea can be a force for good and a route to female empowerment.

Central to challenging the disadvantages faced by women in the global tea industry is the issue of 'voice'. Women workers need to be able to speak out via a committee or trade union. The requirement for gender committees on all Fairtrade-certified farms is one way that Fairtrade aims to support women's voices to be heard, particularly in decision-making around the use of Fairtrade Premiums. However, these committees cannot address much of the deep-rooted discrimination against women in many tea-growing regions. In the case of tea farmers, there is also a need for more women to be elected to the boards of small producer organisations.

²⁶Ranging from 30% in Indonesia and Malawi, to 50% in Sri Lanka and India (Assam), to 60% in Bangladesh and 61% in Vietnam. Sources: Luis Pinero Caro, Wages and working conditions in the tea sector: the case of India, Indonesia and Viet Nam Geneva: International Labour Office, December 2020; Ethical Tea Partnership, Factsheet on Women, 2020; personal communication from a trade union leader in Bangladesh. Data for Kenya not found

THE SAFETY OF WOMEN

There have been serious allegations of sexual harassment on tea farms and estates. Women are at risk in many everyday activities, whether they are working on an estate, or as a small tea farmer. Numerous reports and investigations²⁷ have highlighted persistent sexual harassment of women workers on tea estates.²⁸

In Kenya, 90% of female tea pickers have been victims of – or have witnessed – sexual or physical abuse.²⁹ However, impunity for perpetrators alongside a host of structural inequalities and discrimination prevent women from speaking out and reporting the crimes. A recent report by Oxfam looking at experiences of sexual and gender-based violence on Kenyan tea estates found that, with most cases going unreported, women often had to engage in transactional relationships to secure employment.³⁰

The underlying conditions in the tea industry that leave women workers feeling they have little choice but to accede to these demands must be addressed.

“

A FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE IS THE LOW WAGES FOR WOMEN IN THE TEA SECTOR; THIS LEADS TO MALNUTRITION, INDEBTEDNESS AND RISKY SURVIVAL STRATEGIES, SUCH AS TRANSACTIONAL SEX.”

THIRST and Women Working Worldwide.³¹

The increasing use of casual labour in the tea sector compromises women's ability to bring about grievances given they would normally be ineligible for union membership.³²

Women workers on estates have very few options if they experience violence or harassment, since the estate provides their housing and there is nowhere else for them to go. It is not uncommon for their managers to take advantage of women workers' vulnerable position by demanding sexual favours from them.³³

There have been recent efforts to involve unions in preventing sexual harassment. In December 2024, Lipton Teas and Infusions and the global organisation of trade unions in the agricultural sector, the International Union of Food Workers (IUF), signed a Joint Commitment on Preventing Sexual Harassment.³⁴ This commitment is in its early stages, but we welcome this initiative to increase social dialogue and participation of trade unions in addressing risks and we will be looking at what lessons can be learned.

It is critical that all women workers (whether casual or formal) can raise issues, in line with UNGP and human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) principles, which many retailers and brands have adopted. These principles are becoming the basis for regulation in many countries (see chapter 2), and should incorporate the right to remedy for human rights abuses, including gender-based violence and harassment.

“

INITIALLY, WOMEN WERE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HEARD. BUT, WHEN FAIRTRADE CAME IN TO TRAIN US, WOMEN HAD PORTIONS OF TEA PLANTATIONS TO MANAGE OR LAND OWNERSHIP WHICH WASN'T THERE BEFORE... IF WE CAN GET SOME FUNDING, WE WANT TO REACH MORE OF OUR FARMERS SO THAT IT CAN GIVE MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO THE WOMEN.”

Linner Ruto, Tea Farmer at Fintea Co-operative in Kenya.

²⁷BBC News, True cost of our tea: Sexual abuse on Kenyan tea farms revealed, 20th February 2023. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64662056> (accessed 7th April 2025)

²⁸Ethical Tea Partnership (2024), Protecting People, Transforming Tea: 2024 A Private Sector Approach for Addressing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (SEAH). Available at: https://etp-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Protect_People_Transform_Tea-CLCPA_Report_2024.pdf (accessed 7th April 2025)

²⁹Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, (2021) Trouble brewing the needs for transparency in tea supply chains, 2021, p. 8. Available at: https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/2021_Tea_Report_v4.pdf (accessed 7th April 2025)

³⁰Oxfam (2025), Tea leaves a mark: The voice of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya's tea estates, March. Available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/tea-leaves-a-mark-the-voice-of-survivors-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-621689/> (accessed 7th April 2025)

³¹THIRST and Women Working Worldwide (2023) Consent. Just consent. Then you can come to work. Risk factors for Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the Tea Sector, A briefing paper by THIRST and Women Working Worldwide, 2023

³²Oxfam (2025), Tea leaves a mark: The voice of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya's tea estates, March pp. 9-10, 212025 Available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/tea-leaves-a-mark-the-voice-of-survivors-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-621689/> (accessed 15th April 2025)

³³Duara, Mridusmita & Mallick, Sambit (2019) Women Workers & Industrial Relations in Tea Estates of Assam, The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, 55:1 (July)

³⁴IUF (2024), IUF and LIPTON Teas and Infusions agreement on preventing sexual harassment, 16th December. Available at: <https://www.iuf.org/news/iuf-and-lipton-teas-and-infusions-agreement-on-preventing-sexual-harassment/> (accessed 7th April 2025)

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ENVIRONMENT



MR MURUGARAJ, SUPERVISOR WHO HAS DEVELOPED A REFORESTATION PROJECT USING FAIRTRADE PREMIUM FUNDS AT STANES ESTATES, INDIA.

Tea is a climate sensitive crop and growing it is extremely labour-intensive. It only grows well when it is warm and wet, limiting the tea harvesting season in many countries.

Climate change is already having a huge impact on tea growing communities. Several tea-growing regions such as Assam and Darjeeling are predicted to face substantial losses in production within decades, unless action is taken.

With less rainfall, tea crops' dependence on irrigation is increasing, and pest activity, leaf quality and the impact of the changing climate on human health is all contributing to tea farming becoming more expensive against a backdrop of flattening prices and falling demand for the crops they have grown.

Fairtrade tea growers and pickers consistently bring up the climate crisis as one of the biggest threats to their livelihoods, as seen in our recent Kenyan research (see page 7).

“

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE TO TEA PRODUCTION IS CLIMATE CHANGE. WE ARE EXPERIENCING BOTH EXTREMES, WHERE IT IS VERY WARM, AND IT IS TOO HOT...AS WELL AS A LOT OF RAIN, WHICH ALSO AFFECTS THE QUALITY OF TEA...TEA REQUIRES MODERATE WEATHER, NOT EXTREME WEATHER CONDITIONS. THIS AFFECTS THE PRODUCTION, AS WELL AS THE PRICES AND THE AMOUNT OF MONEY WE GET FOR OUR TEA.”

Rose Mayaso, Tea Farmer at Sukambizi farm in Malawi.

“

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, OUR CHALLENGES HAVE INTENSIFIED, BECOMING BOTH SERIOUS AND FORMIDABLE. CLIMATE CHANGE HAS EMERGED AS A MAJOR THREAT [FOR THE TEA INDUSTRY].”

Suneel Singh Sikand, Vice Chairman of the Indian Tea Association (ITA)³⁷

Key findings of a Fairtrade study identified that severe climate change impacts will affect most people growing and harvesting Fairtrade crops. The greatest change is increased ‘warm spells’, with wide-ranging impacts including changes to planting cycles, crop productivity, extreme events, water logging, pests and diseases and poor soil quality and health. In the case of tea, heat stress and a reduction in rainfall are expected to severely affect producers in countries such as India, Malawi and Tanzania.³⁵

In Kenya, climate-related impacts such as rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, droughts and new insect infestations are reported to be causing losses to tea yields. By 2050, climate change is expected to reduce the optimal conditions for tea production in the country by a quarter (26.2%).³⁶

Climate change will exacerbate many of the existing problems in the tea industry and is already affecting tea growing communities and their families.

Tea prices may become unstable, with knock-on impacts on earnings, threatening both the future of small farms and larger estates. As small farmers experience fluctuations in crops, they may fall further into debt, and the vulnerability of women farmers may increase.

Climate change can also mean increased risks to the health of the people behind the tea we drink. The average temperature in August in Assam ranges between 24°C and 35.3°C. As much of the work involved in growing and harvesting tea takes place outside, the people working in these conditions are at increased risk of dehydration, heat stress, cardiovascular stress, respiratory issues and headaches caused by increased temperatures. Alongside these long-term effects to workers’ health, working in high heat increases the short-term risk of accidents and lowers picking productivity, which can impact workers incomes.³⁸ Climate change will lead to more optimal conditions for pests that attack tea bushes, such as the tea mosquito.³⁹ This may lead to increased use of harmful pesticides, impacting human health and compromising biodiversity and water quality as runoff enters streams and rivers. While Fairtrade supports the people we work with to reduce damaging pesticide use, this support may not exist for people that are not working with Fairtrade.

Growing organic tea can also reduce environmental impacts (through composting, crop rotation and biological pest control to protect soil and wildlife). Approximately 40% of Fairtrade tea sales were organic in 2023 largely due to long-term UK partner Clipper, who strive towards sourcing organic and Fairtrade tea across their supply chains.⁴⁰



³⁵Fairtrade International (2021). Fairtrade and climate change: Systematic review, hotspot analysis and survey, October. Available at: <https://www.fairtrade.net/en/get-involved/library/fairtrade-and-climate-change--systematic-review--hotspot-analysis.html> (accessed 7th April 2025)

³⁶Christian Aid (2021), Reading the tea leaves Climate change and the British cuppa, May. Available at: <https://mediacentre.christianaid.org.uk/climate-threat-brewing-for-british-cuppa-new-report/> (accessed 7th April 2025)

³⁷The Assam Tribune (2025), ‘Climate change has emerged as a major threat for tea industry’, says Indian Tea Association, 10 March. Available at: 2025 <https://assamtribune.com/assam/climate-change-has-emerged-as-a-major-threat-for-tea-industry-says-indian-tea-association-1570681> (accessed 7th April 2025)

³⁸The 2024 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: facing record-breaking threats from delayed action Romanello, Marina et al., The Lancet, 404:10465, p. 1856. Available at: Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change <https://lancetcountdown.org/explore-our-data/> (accessed 7th April 2025)

³⁹Somnath Roy, Somnath, Narayanannair Muraleedharan, Narayanannair, Ananda Mukhapadhyay, Ananda & Handique, Gautam Handique (2015): The tea mosquito bug, *Helopeltis theivora*

⁴⁰Fairtrade data, 2023: <https://www.flocert.net/glossary/fairtrade/>

CHAPTER 2:

INFUSING COLLABORATIVE CHANGE

The lives of today's tea workers are dictated by systemic issues out of their control: low wages and incomes, a lack of power in decision-making and the impacts of climate change. In this chapter, we look at the systemic changes required to ensure the people growing the tea we drink can thrive. These changes will require a collaborative approach, with all stakeholders in the tea sector playing their part and working together.

Here we outline how the tea sector, Fairtrade, government and consumers are already having an impact, and the additional action they need to take together to make a tangible, positive impact on the lives of tea workers, their families and communities.

The role of the tea sector

As outlined in chapter 1, the tea sector is wide-ranging and complex, with large companies, brands, traders, governments, certification bodies (including Fairtrade) consumers and more all contributing to the reality of tea workers today, and therefore all with the potential to create positive change in the future.

We believe that transparency and open conversations are needed in the tea industry.

Over the years, numerous studies, reports and investigations have highlighted the issues, but the sector has been slow to respond and has not been transparent about their supply chain and how they are addressing issues within it. Some major brands are starting to share more information, however, little change has been seen for the people growing and plucking tea.

The tea sector has also been slow to take action towards achieving living incomes and wages for tea workers. Employment practices such as picking quotas for wages contribute to low pay. Poverty is a driver for many human rights violations, so achieving a living income or wage is vital to eliminate human rights violations from supply chains.⁴¹

Raising incomes and wages for tea producers will require commitment, collaboration and action between retailers,

brands, traders and civil society – the scale of the shift required is huge, but absolutely necessary to achieve long-term progress for tea workers.

Ongoing power imbalances across the supply chain are contributing to human rights violations and poor working conditions.⁴² As an example, a large proportion of global tea is sold by auction, which often sees a small number of very large buyers using their strength to dictate the prices at which tea is sold. This means that traders can capitalise on price movements, and local buyers find it hard to compete with multinationals. Direct consultation with tea growers on purchasing practices and long-term sourcing contracts are critical to changing these power imbalances.

Companies should also make long-term sourcing agreements with producers to best support collaboration and continuous improvement.

Companies have a duty to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. The United Nations developed the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP) with a specific requirement for businesses to carry out human rights due diligence. It states this process “should include assessing actual and potential human rights impacts, integrating and acting upon the findings, tracking responses, and communicating how impacts are addressed”.⁴³

However, much more transparency is needed in terms of how businesses improve, review and uphold human rights and environmental responsibilities in their supply chains. They must centre this process on the needs of farmers and workers, consulting with them and implementing grievance mechanisms aligned with the expectations of the ‘effectiveness criteria’ of the UNGP.

It is only through collective collaboration that we can make tea fairer.

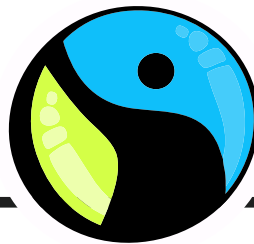
⁴¹Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (2021) Trouble brewing: The need for transparency in tea supply chains https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/2021_Tea_Report_v4.pdf

THE ROLE OF FAIRTRADE

The UK accounts for 61% of all Fairtrade tea sold across the world. Fairtrade has worked in the tea sector for the last three decades, and in that time we have worked in partnership with companies to source Fairtrade tea and deliver specialist programmes and expertise.

Our key areas of work

- Since we began, Fairtrade has built and invested in the **Fairtrade Producer Networks** – a unique community-based network of the people behind our most-loved food and drinks across the world. These networks in Latin America, Africa and Asia understand the local context and the challenges they face, and can co-create solutions that will drive progress towards better conditions and practices.
- **The Fairtrade Minimum Price and Premium** provide a vital safety net in a sector with persistent low prices, wages and incomes, while supporting efforts to achieve living wages and incomes and addressing social and environmental issues.
- **The Fairtrade Standards** for certification aim to protect workers' rights, and distribute power in trade relations more equally between the people behind the tea we drink and those buying it.
- Fairtrade also **delivers programmes** co-designed with and led by the people impacted such as our partnership with UK retailer Co-op to deliver the Fairtrade Alliance for Climate-Smart Supply Chains in Africa (FACSCA) which worked with tea farmers in both Kenya and Rwanda to deliver training and support for sustainable farming practices.



Fairtrade facts

- Clipper is the largest Fairtrade tea brand and supported the creation of the Fairtrade tea standards over 30 years ago.
- In 2008, Co-op was the first UK retailer to sell Fairtrade own brand tea. The 99 Blend is still sold today, sourced partly from Fintea Growers Co-operative Union – a co-operative which Co-op supported to form in the same year and has had a sourcing commitment to ever since. Co-op's commitment to source 100% Fairtrade tea is an example of the retailer's longstanding dedication to stand alongside tea communities.
- Greggs has been offering customers Fairtrade tea in its stores and on-the-go since 2012.
- Marks & Spencer has the longest commitment to working with Fairtrade on 100% of its own-brand Fairtrade tea and coffee of any UK retailer, and generates more Fairtrade Premium for tea growers than any other UK retailer.
- In 2023, Ringtons supplied more Fairtrade tea globally than any other supplier.
- Sainsbury's has converted all of its black tea sourcing to Fairtrade this year. This move builds on a longstanding 23-year partnership between the retailer and Fairtrade and will contribute to building a sustainable tea sector and a resilient food system.
- All Waitrose & Partners' own-label tea is 100% Fairtrade.



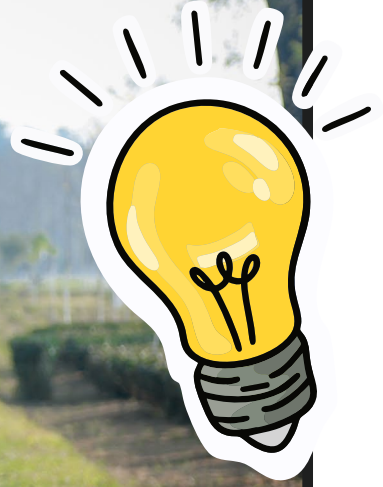
ON THE FACSCA PROJECT, OUR MEMBERS HAVE BENEFITTED, ESPECIALLY ON TRAININGS... THEY HAVE DONE BETTER ON THEIR PRODUCTION. THEY ARE IMPROVING THEIR LIVELIHOOD."

Stanley Talam, FINTEA, Kenya.



⁴²Independent Commission for Aid Impact 2024 Rapid Review: UK aid's international climate finance commitments - ICAI, 29th February. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/html-version/uk-aids-international-climate-finance-commitments/> (accessed 7th April 2025)

⁴³UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, 2011, p.17 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf



**WORKERS ON BICYCLES
BOUGHT USING
FAIRTRADE FUNDS AT
CHAMONG TEA EXPORTS
IN ASSAM, INDIA.**

Whilst we have had a significant, positive impact on the people behind the tea we drink over the last three decades, we acknowledge that much more is needed.

The volumes of Fairtrade tea that producers can sell to Fairtrade markets remains incredibly low (around 4% percent of eligible Fairtrade production is sold on Fairtrade terms), limiting Fairtrade's ability to achieve more.

We want to work with as many actors in the tea industry as possible to deliver the greatest changes at scale. This includes working with brands and retailers to convert their tea volumes to Fairtrade, as well as with governments, civil society organisations and businesses to collaborate on ways to address the most systemic issues in tea supply chains.

We require new solutions to drive forward lasting impact in a sector where challenges remain widespread.

Over the next three years, Fairtrade is committing to transforming our work in the tea sector including:

- Working with industry, CSOs, producers and workers to collaboratively review Fairtrade's approach to tea certification for greater impact, alignment with market realities and continuous improvement.
- Reviewing how we work with and support the Fairtrade Producer Networks to tackle, address and report on allegations of human rights violations and environmental harm.
- Raising awareness with UK tea drinkers on the true cost of their tea.
- Continuing to advocate towards the UK government and the tea sector for meaningful and systemic change.

THE UNITED NILGIRI TEA ESTATES (UNTE), SOUTH INDIA



MS SUNITHA DEVI,
TEA PLUCKER, UNTE, INDIA.

Education is a priority for the South Indian community around the United Nilgiri Tea Estates (UNTE). Incomes in the region are very low and its rural location means attending school can be a challenge for many children and their families.

UNTE has chosen to invest some of their Fairtrade Premium in a school that educates around 1,200 children of workers from the surrounding 26 villages. The school also provides safe drinking water for the children, as waterborne diseases are a problem in the area.

Sunitha Devi is a tea worker on one of the UNTE estates and has four young children. She was delighted that three school buses were bought with Fairtrade Premium funds, allowing her children to reliably attend school each day. Before this, Sunitha's children might miss school meaning she was unable to go to work and would lose a day's pay:

"We get them ready on time, send them on the bus and we leave for work. Only when our children get the opportunity to learn in school can they become something in life."

UNTE hopes that, by selling more tea on Fairtrade terms, it can continue to fund projects that support education in their community, including accommodation for teachers on the tea estates.

“
**FAIRTRADE
ISN'T JUST A
CERTIFICATION,
IT'S A PROMISE
FOR OUR
COMMUNITY,
WORKERS AND
ENVIRONMENT.”**

D.D Preetham, General Manager of
Chamraj Estate, Nilgiris District.

THE ROLE OF THE UK GOVERNMENT

The systemic issues in the tea industry require commitment, collaboration and action between retailers, brands, traders and civil society, with the voice of tea workers – including female tea workers – at the heart of discussions. Given the UK government's history in tea and convening power, they are well-placed to lead this collaborative effort, and must do so with urgency.

Protecting human rights

The UK was the first country to adopt a National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights and to introduce the Modern Slavery Act (2015), demonstrating its commitment to protecting and respecting human rights, environmental standards and workers' rights in supply chains.

As a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it promotes awareness of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, and as a member of the International Labour Organization, it accepts its obligation to respect the ILO's Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. However, there are shortfalls in these commitments and legislative tools. In 2024, a Modern Slavery Act Committee concluded that the Modern Slavery Act reflects an issue-specific approach to business due diligence, which fails to protect vulnerable people in the UK's operations and supply chains.

The UK government must adopt a comprehensive approach to business regulation that encompasses all human rights abuses and environmental harms, and incorporates the perspectives and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders, including trade unions and marginalised groups such as casual workers and women workers.

However, this legislation must not put the burden onto growers, workers, estates and farms, adding to their costs and increasing their risks. Companies must take on the responsibility to meet and prove compliance, and support their suppliers to participate so that all workers (permanent and casual, including at estate level) are able to access their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

It must include a focus on closing the gap to living incomes and living wages for farmers and workers in the tea sector by calling on businesses to address unfair purchasing practices, pricing structures and business models which undermine progress.

Companies should be required to publish transparent reporting on their sourcing and buying practices to ensure they capture all the risks, including those of workers in tea factories and estates and of smallholder tea farmers.

Robust regulation would hold irresponsible companies accountable to not only report on, but to also prove they have taken all reasonable steps to address, human rights and environmental violations. This approach would also level the playing field for responsible businesses that seek to protect human rights and take steps to protect the people in their supply chains.

Protecting our shared environment

The UK has long been a champion for increases to international climate finance. In 2009, at the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) in Copenhagen, the UK and other countries jointly committed to mobilising \$100 billion annually by 2020, from both public and private sources, for climate action in low income countries.⁴⁴ The UK has since committed to provide at least £11.6 billion in international climate finance (ICF) between 2021-22 and 2025-26, ensuring a balance between climate change adaptation and mitigation. This would include at least £3 billion on protecting and restoring nature, and £1.5 billion on forestry.

However, with cumulative reductions to the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget to 0.3% of Gross National Income (GNI) announced in February 2025, Fairtrade is concerned that the UK government will be a) stretched to honour its climate funding commitments, and b) allowing existing aid spending to be counted as climate finance. The latter is important, because the lack of transparency in ICF accounting means that no additional financing will go to those who are impacted the most by climate change yet have done the least to cause it.⁴⁵

The climate emergency has had, and will continue to have, direct consequences for human rights. In addition to strong legislation and collaborative action, funding will be required to raise incomes and support tea workers to adapt to the impacts of climate change. To do this, the UK must restore its aid budget to 0.5% of GNI and deliver on its climate finance commitment.



⁴⁴See UK aid's international climate finance commitments - ICAI

⁴⁵See ICAI, *ibid*



MS UMAWATHI,
TEA PLUCKER, MATHESON
ESTATES, INDIA.

THE ROLE OF THE UK PUBLIC

In communities across the UK, people are campaigning for change on a myriad of issues. In recent years we have all come to understand just how connected we really are and how much we rely on each other globally.

In a world that can often feel like it is becoming more unfair, Fairtrade is a people-led movement for change, rallying a global community of millions of people to fight for justice for the people we rely on for some of our most-loved goods from tea and coffee to chocolate, bananas and cotton.


We all deserve the ability to live safe, fulfilling lives and look after our families and, in the UK, we have considerable power and influence to change the way our goods are produced and traded.

Together, we can send clear messages to companies: that we demand change for the people behind the tea we drink. Fairtrade would not be a fixture on supermarket shelves in the UK without the UK public who have grown and strengthened the demand for more ethical products.

But without addressing policies and tackling the structural issues that deny people their human rights, no approach to change can really be sustainable.

To change the future for the people behind the tea we drink, we must collectively tell the UK government and our local representatives to play their part in making trade fair for everyone.

SUKAMBIZI ASSOCIATION TRUST, MALAWI



CHRISIE JEFULY USING
A TAP INSTALLED USING
FAIRTRADE PREMIUM AT
SUKAMBIZI.

“

**I AM GRATEFUL FOR
THE FAIRTRADE
PREMIUMS, WHICH
HAVE MADE IT
POSSIBLE FOR US
TO ACCESS WATER
CLOSE TO HOME.”**

Chrisie Jefuly, co-operative and
community member.

For years, many people living in the Mount Mulanje region of southern Malawi had to walk long distances to collect water from contaminated rivers and streams – until the Sukambizi Association Trust invested Fairtrade Premium in a clean water project.

The Sukambizi Association Trust, a co-operative of over 12,000 farmers, is on a mission to improve life for its members and surrounding communities. That means making clean water a priority.

Using Fairtrade Premium earned from tea sales, Sukambizi built a 35km pipeline to bring water to over 40 villages. For the first time, farmers and their families now have access to clean drinking water in their own homes. This has had a number of positive knock-on effects, including children who were previously responsible for collecting water now being able to attend school, and adults knowing they can work without becoming ill from waterborne diseases.

Sukambizi has also used its Fairtrade Premium to bring electricity to around 2,000 households by funding the infrastructure, including electricity poles. This means that services like barber shops can open locally and electrical items can be installed in households. Community members have been able to buy fridges, reducing food waste and time spent on shopping trips.

Ruth Luciano, a Sukambizi Tea Farmer, said “Life is better now. My children have benefited because they can now study at night.”

CONCLUSION:

BREW IT FAIR: AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE



Below, we summarise our ambitious agenda for change in the tea sector, setting out how the UK government, businesses, certification organisations, civil society, campaigners and tea drinkers can take action to improve the lives of tea farmers and workers.

For the UK government:

- **Introduce a UK law on human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD).** Centred on the needs of farmers and workers, with a focus on supporting living incomes and living wages, ensuring that the costs and burdens of proof and compliance are not passed onto overseas farmers and workers, and addressing unsustainable purchasing practices, pricing structures and business models which undermine progress.
- **Support multi-stakeholder collaboration to address challenges and build progress to living incomes and living wages in the tea sector.** A first step would be to convene a roundtable with all stakeholders, including senior government officials, businesses and representatives of tea workers and smallholder tea farmers, to discuss the multiple challenges facing the tea sector and how to move towards a fairer tea sector.
- **Honour the UK's International Climate Finance (UKICF) commitment and immediately restore the ODA budget to 0.5% of gross national income.** Ensure aid and climate funds can support the people behind the tea we drink to adapt and build resilience to climate change.

For the UK public:

- **Call on the UK government** to ensure the people growing the tea we drink can plan for their futures, are protected from the impacts of climate change and won't have to worry about the things we all need.
- **Brew it Fair.** Buy Fairtrade tea and help to ensure more tea workers and farmers get a better deal.

For the tea sector, including retailers, certification organisations and civil society:

- **Commit to transparency in the tea supply chain.**
- **Continuous improvement through human rights and environmental due diligence.** Always centred on the needs of tea farmers and workers.
- **Implementation of sustainable purchasing practices.** Developing long-term sourcing commitments is vital.
- **Working together in collaboration and at scale.** Through partnerships with tea farmers and workers to generate trust.



**BREW IT
FAIR**

This report was researched, written and edited by Fairtrade Foundation and Nice and Serious in collaboration with Stirling Smith.

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