

RED COLOUR OF TEA

Central Issues that Impact the
Tea Plantation Community in Sri Lanka

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Human Development Organization

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by A.S. Chandrabose & P.P. Sivapragasam

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Preface

Although much has been written with regard to production of tea and the living and working conditions of the plantation workers in Sri Lanka, not so much attempt appears to have been hitherto made to explore the socio-economic issues from a human rights perspective of the plantation community. We have, therefore, tried to analyze the central issues that impact the tea plantation community, particularly workers living and working in the tea plantations in Sri Lanka from the human rights perspective.

To this day plantations play an important role in the economy of many countries in the world. However international financial crisis and the, basic changes in economics and politics during the last few decades have relatively reshaped the trade relationship between the consumers and producers. In terms of labour, capital and the management also, the relationship has been redefined between these forces, with many implications to the industry.

Plantations remain an important unit of the agricultural production in the economy of Sri Lanka as well, and the tea sector continues to contribute considerably to the economy of Sri Lanka. The companies involved in the tea marketing chain made almost 34 percent profits on the average by selling every kg of tea from auctions during 2000 to 2008. In 2010 the export of tea reached a record level of 314.6 million kg and it received US \$. 1.37 billion as foreign remittance, which accounted for 16.7 percent of the total exchange earnings of the country.

The plantation system has undergone changes in ownership with, first as a result of the nationalization and, then the re privatization. But, in spite of the multiplicity of trade unions, the people in the plantation sector have been subjected

to various forms of discrimination concerning their civil, political, economic, social, cultural and right to development continuously.

This study aims to create an understanding of the situation and issues confronting the tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka in terms of the status of health and education, freedom from poverty, fair and just wage, conditions of employment, struggle of plantation women workers and the role of the stakeholders in the development of the plantation community.

There is no doubt that the plantation sector will retain its importance in the country's economy in the future as well, which however will largely depend on the sustenance of the plantation workers. We believe that the challenges of the plantation people can be effectively overcome, and a mechanism developed to include the plantation workers in the decision making process.

We are glad to share this information with the hope that it will serve as an impetus for developing lobby and advocacy strategies towards building global solidarity among plantation workers and to take collective action together.

P.P. Sivapragasam
Director
Human Development Organization (HDO)

Foreword

The *French Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development* (CCFD) has been in alliance with Catholic development agencies, working for global justice (CIDSE). It is a key supporter of HDO – Sri Lanka which is actively working for the socio-economic and cultural development of the tea plantation worker in Sri Lanka. About five years back HDO carried out a national and international campaign for the Sri Lankan citizenship of the plantation Tamil community successfully. In the meantime CCFD had had the privilege of being in strategic partnership with HDO with a deep understanding of the state of affairs of the tea plantation workers with a view to uplifting their socio-economic status within the framework of a complex globalized capitalist economy.

The publication namely “Red Colour of Tea” is the result of the collaboration between HDO, SOMO and CCFD. It is the first eye opener of divergent forces in relation to the poverty, exclusion and discrimination faced by the tea plantation community in Sri Lanka. We hope that this monographic research will open the path for constructive dialogue and fair collaboration of all stakeholders involved in the tea sector, particularly the estate management, trade unions and the government authority.

This is a detailed study which also covers the socio – economic issues related to plantation workers, realized through the coordinated efforts of Mr. P.P. Sivapragasam and Ms. S. Vijayadharsini and with Dr. A.S. Chandrabose and the research team of acted closely in collecting, analyzing of HDO

and compiling primary and secondary data. Dr. Sanne van der Wal of SOMO shaped and guided the research process in close collaboration with CCFD, which would extend financial support as part of its strategic partnership with HDO. We hope that this publication will reach a wider audience including policy makers, researchers, social activists, civil society organizations and tea consumers, and will be the foundation for building a large social movement in the leading tea countries towards realize the objective envisaged in publication.

Sylvain Ropital
Project Officer in charge of South Asia
French Catholic Committee against Hunger and for
Development-CCFD
Paris

Acknowledgement

The production of the book *Red Colour of Tea Central Issues that impact the Tea Plantation Community in Sri Lanka* would not have been possible without the support and valuable contributions of a large number of individuals and institutions.

The Human Development Organization (HDO) expresses its special gratitude to Dr. A.S. Chandrabose and Mr. P.P. Sivapragasam, who as the authors of the chapters provided the theoretical as well as practical framework for the research report.

The HDO would like to give special thanks to following individuals and institutions.

- Dr. Sanne van der Wal of SOMO, Netherlands and Mr. Sylvian Ropital of CCFD, France, for their valuable inputs and for coordinating the development of the study, Ms. S. Vijayadharsini for coordinating the research and editing of the book and Mr. M.P. Sivapragasam for English proof reading and corrections.
- Field Research Assistants and the staff of the HDO, particularly Ms. P. Logeswary Program Coordinator, Ms. H.J. Farhana Financial Officer and Mr. K. Kamaladasan Project Officer whose collaborative research efforts made it possible to complete the research project.
- Executives and staff of the plantations who extended their cooperation for a fruitful field level study.

- ◉ CCFD, France for their technical and financial support, without which we would not have been able to publish this book.
- ◉ Most importantly, the Up Country Plantation Community who enriched the experience of HDO and inspired the development of the study.

- Human Development Organization -

Executive Summary

The contemporary socio-economic and political researches pertaining to the plantation sector are gaining importance, with specific reference to human development. In this context a greater need has arisen to extend the research to human rights centered issues.

On this basis, the “Red Colour of Tea”: Central Issues that Impact the Tea Plantation Community in Sri Lanka, attempts to analyze the current critical economic and social issues facing the tea plantation workers; the relative factors, and identify ways and means of solving them through a socio-human rights approach.

It is apparent that the social and economic issues of these workers, as well as their living and working conditions are directly linked to their wage - income, job opportunities, education, health, housing, the labour dignity and rights, and indirectly to the tea sales, export and marketing aspects.

Global Perspective

To this day plantations play an important role in the agricultural production in many parts of the world. However, basic changes in the international finance, economics and politics during the last few decades have relatively restructured the trade relationship between the western and eastern countries. In terms of labour, capital and the management also, the relationship between these countries has been redefined. This has many implications for the future development and sustainability of plantations through the plantations are no longer necessarily the choice for the governments of developing countries and Multi National Companies (MNCs) seeking to improve the national economy.

Tea Sector in Sri Lanka

The tea sector continues to contribute considerably to the economy of Sri Lanka. In 2010 the production of tea reached a record level of 329 million kg, and out of this, 95 percent had been exported, receiving US \$1.37 billion as foreign exchange. The quantity of tea export increased from 184.7 million kg in 1980 to 314.6 million kg in 2010. Sri Lankan tea industry hit its highest record generating Rs.1.37 billion in income, which accounted for 16.7 percent of the total exchange earnings of the country in that year. The companies involved in the tea marketing chain made almost 34 percent profits on the average by selling every kilogram of tea in auctions during 2000 to 2008.

Sri Lanka exported tea to the UK which had been a major consumer for more than a century, but competitions from the East African countries and failure of the marketing strategies of Sri Lankan exporters led to a decline in exports to the UK; the tea export to the EU markets- mainly the UK, Germany and Netherlands, declined from around 22 million kg during the 1990s has dropped to 17 million kg in 2008.

Plantation Workers

The Up Country Plantation Tamil people form a minority community (about 6 percent of the population) in Sri Lanka. The plantation workers were originally brought from Southern India to Sri Lanka as semi slave labour to work on the plantations in the 1820s, under the British colonial rule. The plantation system has undergone changes owing to the nationalization and subsequent privatization, and the system of management has also been reshaped by the growth of trade unions. The people living in the Sri Lankan plantations have been subjected to various forms of discrimination, having been denied political, socio-economic and cultural rights along with

the right to development. According to the Ministry of Plantation Industry (MPI), there were around 800,000 people living in the plantations, and the registered workforce in the plantation sector numbered 242,266 persons as of 2009.

Housing & Health

Right to housing is another serious problem faced by the plantation community. As per Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2009/10, 56.1 percent of the plantation workers continue to live in line rooms. The design of these “line-rooms” (usually, single room, barrack-type residential units) does not improve or for that matter help sustain the health of the inhabitants. These line rooms are found scattered inside the plantations. They were constructed during the British rule. The health care system in the plantation sector is comparatively lower than in the other sectors. 30 percent of the children have low birth weight, and 40 percent of them are stunted and under-weighting. This unsatisfactory state of affairs is caused either by poor and basic healthcare facilities or by the complete absence of healthcare facility in the plantation sector.

Plantation Human Development Trust (Trust) was established in order to look into the social welfare conditions of the workers in the privatized plantations. Although various activities are carried-out by this Trust, the family planning methods that it adopts are quite a threat to the reproductive rights of the female plantation workers. It is reported that on many plantations the women are subjected to compulsory family planning. The women are taken in lorries for vasectomy, and after the surgery they are brought back in lorries. The officers concerned take advantage of the prevailing low literacy rate among the plantation women, to keep the latter from choosing between a safe, temporary method and permanent method. It has to be noted in this respect that the women’s right to reproduction is violated.

Poverty Among the Plantation Workers

There is growing poverty among the plantation workers. The year 2006/07 recorded it to be 32 percent, while at the national level it was 15.3 percent. Their development has been frozen and their welfare neglected for a longer period of time (World Bank - 2007). While 32 percent of those who are in the plantation sector are poverty stricken, only 13 percent are receiving state welfare assistance. Sri Lanka is a partner of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which seek to alleviate poverty. In the meantime, in the last report on poverty in Sri Lanka, the highest poverty level of 33.8 percent is recorded from the Nuwara Eliya district where there are many plantations. The aforementioned claim is confirmed by this fact. It is also apparent therefore, that excepting the former war zones, the most poverty stricken area is Nuwara Eliya district. The poverty level in the plantation sector is four fold higher than that of the urban sector, which means that in the plantation sector 32 out of 100 are living below official poverty line.

Wage Struggle

Plantation industry is one of the major Foreign Exchange Earning sectors. Around 4.5 percent of the Sri Lankan workforce is directly employed in it. Since the re-privatization of the plantations in 1992, the daily wage of the tea and the rubber plantation workers is determined on the basis of a Collective Agreement (CA), signed between the plantation Trade Unions and the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC). It is renewable once in two years. Men and women plantation workers receive equal wages since a wage struggle launched in 1984. However, being a part of the working class that depends on wages for their livelihood, their battle for wage increments has been an unending one.

According to the CA signed in 2009, the Basic Wage was Rs. 285, (US \$ 2.59) Attendance Incentive (AI) Rs. 90 and Price

Share Supplement Rs. 30 (making the gross daily wage Rs. 405) (US \$ 3.68). This wage is the lowest both in terms of the cost of living, and in comparison with the wages paid to workers of other sectors. They cannot be sure if their monthly salary would be the same in the following month. The trade unions have lost their clout and their bargaining power as some of them openly support liberal economic policy for their own political survival.

According to the pilot survey conducted by HDO, a day's expense of a four member family in tea plantations was Rs. 600 (2010). But the basic wage was Rs. 285. If the worker completes the 75 percent work target the total wage would be Rs. 405. Most of the tea and rubber plantation workers find it difficult to live a normal life on their wages. It does not cover the cost of living. Therefore, the plantation workers are living below the poverty line and are in debt, to date.

Employment Issues

The plantation industry is one of the ventures which give employment opportunities to millions of employees directly and indirectly. The tea plantation workers for generations have been employed in the plantation itself. The study has found that the workers who remain in the plantations are either illiterate or poorly educated. Manual labour is still used to pluck tea leaves and largely the women are involved in tea plucking. There is a trend of unwillingness among the youth to work on the plantations. It is common because of youth migration to cities, educational achievements, demeaning treatment and hard nature of the work in the plantations. Especially the female workers have to work on the plantations for longer hours.

In selecting candidates to fill white color job vacancies, preference is given to outsiders over the plantation youth, though the latter may have the necessary qualifications. In the meantime the management promotes casual cadre in the plantation sector

in order to evade statutory obligations. Simultaneously there is a tendency among the plantation workers to be employed on casual basis since it gives them an opportunity to seek part time work outside the plantations, and this enables them to cover their day to day family expenses.

Education

There had been a system of education in the plantation sector from the colonial era, completely different from other sectors. Though there had been some improvement in the field of education, it did not bring about any major, significant social change as regards the community, compared to other sectors at national level. Moreover, the students in this sector have been subjected to discrimination. For example, in the Nuwara Eliya District the Tamils are 58 percent of the total population, but there are only nine (9) IAB grade schools for them, while for the Sinhala students there are nineteen (19) IAB schools.

Out of about 700 plantation schools, 450 have been developed with the support of SIDA, GTZ, IRDP and World Bank. There are still around 250 schools continuing in poor conditions. On the whole, while Sri Lanka's literacy rate is 92 percent, in the plantation sector it is 76 percent yet. This educational drawback, which is a stumbling block to the community's progress, on the other hand, is a challenge to its sustainability.

Women Workers

Over 50 percent of the plantation workforce is constituted by women. Their contribution to the economy of the sector and the country is important. They are also the main subscribers to TUs. But still they have been excluded and oppressed at decision making level in the social, economic and political spheres.

They are compelled to work more both in terms of time and volume. In the meantime with inadequate health facilities

they are denied the right to reproduction. In the TUs they are not given leadership even at grass-roots level. The plantation social structure is completely patriarchal. It is in this context that standing by the plantation community becomes important.

Plantation in the Future

There is no doubt that the plantation sector will retain its importance in the country's economy in the future as well, but it will largely depend on the well-being of the plantation workers. We believe that the challenges of the plantation workers can be effectively overcome, and that a mechanism developed to incorporate the plantation workers into a participatory decision making process with

- their ethnic identity preserved and labour dignity respected,*
- a mechanism put in place to ensure that their labour and human rights are guaranteed and protected,*
- a fair wage capable of poverty reduction and raising their living and working conditions,*
- an affirmative action to bring about a change in the spheres of education and health to attain the MDGs,*
- the present "line housing" replaced with housing schemes with infrastructural facilities which will ensure their right to a land and house,*
- the labour relations pertaining to the plantation employment modernized and rendered worker friendly which will help harmonize and maintain industrial peace and*
- changes brought about in the fair tract and direct worker – consumer relations strengthened.*

Hence an inclusive and transparent program to promote the rights of the Up-Country plantation workers as well as the development in the general institutional structure under MDG is essential.

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Abbreviations

AI	Attendance Incentive
ACELF	All Ceylon Estate Labour Federation
ACL	Assistant Commissioner of Labour
CA	Collective Agreement
CBA	Colombo Brokers Association
CFS	Consumer Finance and Socio-Economic Survey
COLA	Cost of Living Allowances
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CTTA	Colombo Tea Traders Association
CWC	Ceylon Workers Congress
DSD	Divisional Secretariat Division
EFC	Employers' Federation of Ceylon
EMA	Estate Medical Assistant
EPF	Employees' Provident Fund
EWB	Estate Wages Board
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FOB	Fright of Board
FTSS	Federation of the Tea Smallholder Societies
GDP	Gross Domestic Production
GTZ	German Technical Corporation
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
IOT	Indian Origin Tamil
JEDB	Janatha Estate Development Board
JPTUC	Joint plantation Trade Union Centre
LJEWU	Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MPI	Ministry of Plantation Industries
MWO	Minimum Wages Ordinance
NGO	Non Governmental Organizations
NIC	National Identity Card

HDO

NIPM	National Institute of Plantation Management
NSA	Net Sale Average
PAC	Planters' Association of Ceylon
PHSWT	Plantation Housing and Social Welfare Trust
PTFOA	Private Tea Factory Owners' Association
PWASA	Plantation Workers' Additional Special Allowances
PWDT	Plantation Workers' Development Trust
SIDA	Sweden International Development Agency
SLSPC	Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation
SLTB	Sri Lanka Tea Board
TASL	Tea Association of Sri Lanka
TCD	Tea Commissioners' Division
TMP	Tea Master Plan
TPB	Tea Promotion Bureau
TRB	Tea Research Board
TRI	Tea Research Institute
TSHDA	Tea Small Holding Development Authority
TU	Trade Union
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VP	Vegetative Propagation

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION



Introduction

1.1 Rationale of the Study

Tea, as an export agricultural venture, during the last three decades, had reached a record level of 329 million kg, in 2010¹. The export of tea received US \$1.37 billion² as foreign exchange adding up to 16.7³ percent of the total value of the exports in 2010. And during the last two decades it contributed to around 2 percent of the Gross Domestic Production (GDP). Around 35 percent of the total production of tea is produced by large-scale, private company managed tea plantations since 1992, and the remaining 65 percent by small tea holdings. Almost 95 percent of the total production is exported to international markets. This is 18 percent of the total supply to the world market. Plucking of tea leaves and processing it in the factories in order to export are the major activities that involve both male and female labour force.

Sri Lanka has one of the finest social welfare records in the developing world. Its welfare policies are funded through

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- 1 Elmo Learned (2011), 'Ceylon Tea Booms Great Guns,' *Lakbima News*, 10 July 2011
 - 2 <http://www.srilanka.co.za/trade.htm> - High Commission of Sri Lanka in South Africa, Trade and Investment; <http://www.lankabusinessonline.com>, Sri Lanka tea export earnings exceed Kenya's - 03 Feb, 2011 & Annual Report 2010/11, John Keels PLC, Colombo.
 - 3 <http://www.ft.lk/category/sectors/agriculture/Sri Lanka 2010 tea output at record 329.4 m kg>.

revenue generated by an agricultural economy, which is still dominated by plantations, the principal crops being tea, rubber and coconut. In 1983 these three crops accounted for over half of Sri Lanka's export earnings. Tea alone accounted for one-third of all export earnings⁴. It accounted for 16.7 percent of the total value of exports in 2010.

The marvel of 140 years of large scale tea sector and the achievements made by the 30 year old small tea holdings in the Southern part of the country are the most undisputed economic activities of the country. However, the success of the tea sector could not accrue benefits for the tea plantation workers⁵ in the large scale tea plantations adequately. The tea plantation workers by and large are mostly Indian Origin Tamils (IOTs) and have been identified in various studies as a backward community. The socio economic conditions of this community are remarkably poor in the country to date.

According to the HIES Report - 2006/07, Sri Lanka⁶, while the rural poverty declined from 29.5 percent in 1990/91 to 15.7 percent in 2006/07, the poverty in the plantation sector increased from 20.5 to 32. The World Bank Report⁷ states that nearly 30 percent of the population in the plantation sector is poor but only 13 percent of the households interviewed reported receiving cash transfers from the government welfare programmes. At national level such assistance is extended to much more than 75 to 85 percent of the poor income groups. In order to mitigate

4 *Annual Reports* (various Issues), Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Colombo

5 The Terms of 'Plantation Workers', 'Estate Workers', 'Estate Tamils', 'Indian Tamil Estate Workers', 'Up-Country People', 'Hill Country People', and 'Indian Tamils' are used interchangeably in this study.

6 Sri Lanka, Household Income and Expenditure Survey- 2006/2007, Department of Census and Statistics, Colombo 2009.

7 *Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment Engendering Growth with Equity*. World Bank Publication 2007, Colombo.

the situation, the plantation managements, have attempted to employ an alternative mechanism by improving some of the social welfare conditions of the tea plantation workers in order to attract them to the jobs in the plantation sector.⁸ However, the outcome has not been sufficient and has not had the desired effect. As such the problem remains unchanged. The plantation workers are also entitled to the government support schemes such as *Samurdhi* benefit (*a cash transfer for low income groups*) and charity payment to old aged persons etc. But none of these adequately reaches the tea plantation workers.

Continuity of the inequalities, constraints and restrictions seriously qualify the rhetoric of the free labour market and perpetuate the use of un-free or semi-free labour. Poor housing conditions and low wages, poor health and sanitary conditions are generally the major grievances of the plantation workers. The workers take advantage of the pre-mature retirement benefit provisions and leave their employment and seek outside employments in order to earn more. A large number of young people are keen to look forward for employment in the urban sector but the final outcome for them is a variety of social problems. Migration for employment to the Middle Eastern countries has become a common feature among the plantation women. However this has created a new problem for the plantation community similar to that for other migrant worker communities. According to the available information 10 to 15 percent of the Tamil plantation women have already migrated to the Middle East.⁹

8 *Ibid.*

9 Chandrabose, A.S., (2009), *Middle East Migration and its Impact on Rural Families: A case study of Selected Rural and Estate Communities in Sri Lanka*, (Mimeograph), Department of Social Studies of the OUSL, Sri Lanka.

The plantation management seems generally indifferent as far as the job opportunities are concerned for the educated children of the plantation workers. The administrative jobs in the plantations are always given to the children of non plantation workers. The few office positions are usually given to Sinhalese applicants.¹⁰ Moreover, several organizations like the Tea Research Institute, National Institute of Plantation Management, Tea Commissioner, and Tea Board and Plantation Company etc. are the institutes which try to create alternative job opportunities for the plantation workers but even those institutions shut them out even if they are eligible. A few have been employed in these institutions, but they are comparatively insignificant both in number and ratio.

Many studies have been conducted in order to bring out the problems of the tea plantation community, and, especially of the plantation workers, but few aim at protecting their rights. Many researches have been conducted on the living conditions of the tea plantation workers but, the approaches seem to be problematic. This study, on the contrary, pays special attention to their rights, and targets the national as well as the international stakeholders. Moreover, the study can be considered the first of its kind undertaken by a Sri Lankan civil organization, taking into consideration the problems of the tea plantation workers' economic right such as access to ownership of house, ownership of production, access to market their production and investment of the tea plantation workers. The important question raised in this respect is why the IOT Sri Lankan citizens have been excluded from the overall social development of the country.

10 Asian Development Bank (2002), Sri Lanka Plantation Development Project.. p. 40,

Therefore, this study advocates remedies for the critical issues that impact on the tea plantation community in Sri Lanka with identified stakeholders. The overall objective of this study is to prepare a separate strategy for advocacy which could be applied by the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) locally and internationally.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To identify critical issues from the perspective of the Sri Lankan tea plantation community.
2. To assert the mechanisms, factors and actors influencing these issues.
3. To explore remedial strategies for these issues.

The specific research questions for the above identified objectives are:

1. What are the most pressing political, social and economic issues of the tea plantation workers and their families?
2. What are the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders that influence the conditions of the tea plantation workers?
3. How do these mechanisms (eg. legislation, plantation policies/standards, and social standards, employers, prices, purchasing practices) affect the living and working conditions of the target group?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies.