

ETP's Inaugural Roundtable in India

Event Report

with support from TeaVision Trust

8-9 November 2023 – Kolkata, India

etp

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Overview

ETP Roundtable 2023

In November 2023, ETP held its Inaugural Roundtable in India with support from TeaVision Trust. The Roundtable was an opportunity to convene stakeholders across the Indian tea sector, from members of tea estate communities to producers, packers, tea associations, and more. The aim of the Roundtable was to convene the Indian tea sector to review the policies that impact people working in tea, promote responsible business practices, mainstream social protection, ensure gender equality in the tea industry in Assam, and discuss the future of tea in Assam with the growth of Small Tea Growers.

About the hosts

ETP's mission is to catalyse long-term, systemic change, to benefit everybody who works in tea – especially people in tea-producing regions. In all its work, ETP seeks diverse partnerships with stakeholders across the tea sector, helping evolve new ways of tackling issues.

TeaVision Trust is an independent think tank that takes a 360-degree view of India's Tea Industry for benefit of all stakeholders.

The Roundtable's aim was to convene stakeholders, and initiate industry-wide collaboration.



Right: ETP Country Manager for India, Ms. Ranjana Das opens ETP's Inaugural Roundtable in India.

Opening session

ETP's India Country Manager, Ms. Ranjana Das, welcomed delegates and opened the Roundtable, paving the way for opening remarks by ETP's Chair of the Board, Mr. Tom Franks. Stressing the global nature of the tea industry, he highlighted its impact beyond local boundaries. Tom emphasised the potential of businesses as a positive force, bringing together producers, packers, tea experts, and government officials to promote sustainability within the tea sector.

Ms. Jenny Costelloe, ETP's Executive Director, provided an overview of ETP's strategy and outlined the objectives of the Roundtable. She highlighted the significance of hosting the event in the heart of the tea industry in India, with the goal of directly capturing insights from producers.

Ms. Runa Sarkar, Professor at Indian Institute of Management Kolkata, delivered a thought-provoking keynote to delegates. She highlighted the impact of global warming on the tea industry and stressed the importance of profitability achieved through responsible resource management. Prof. Sarkar highlighted the connection between higher revenue, responsible resource practices, and the wellbeing and retention of employees, emphasising their collective impact on overall industry productivity.

Below: Members of the opening panel kick off the Roundtable.

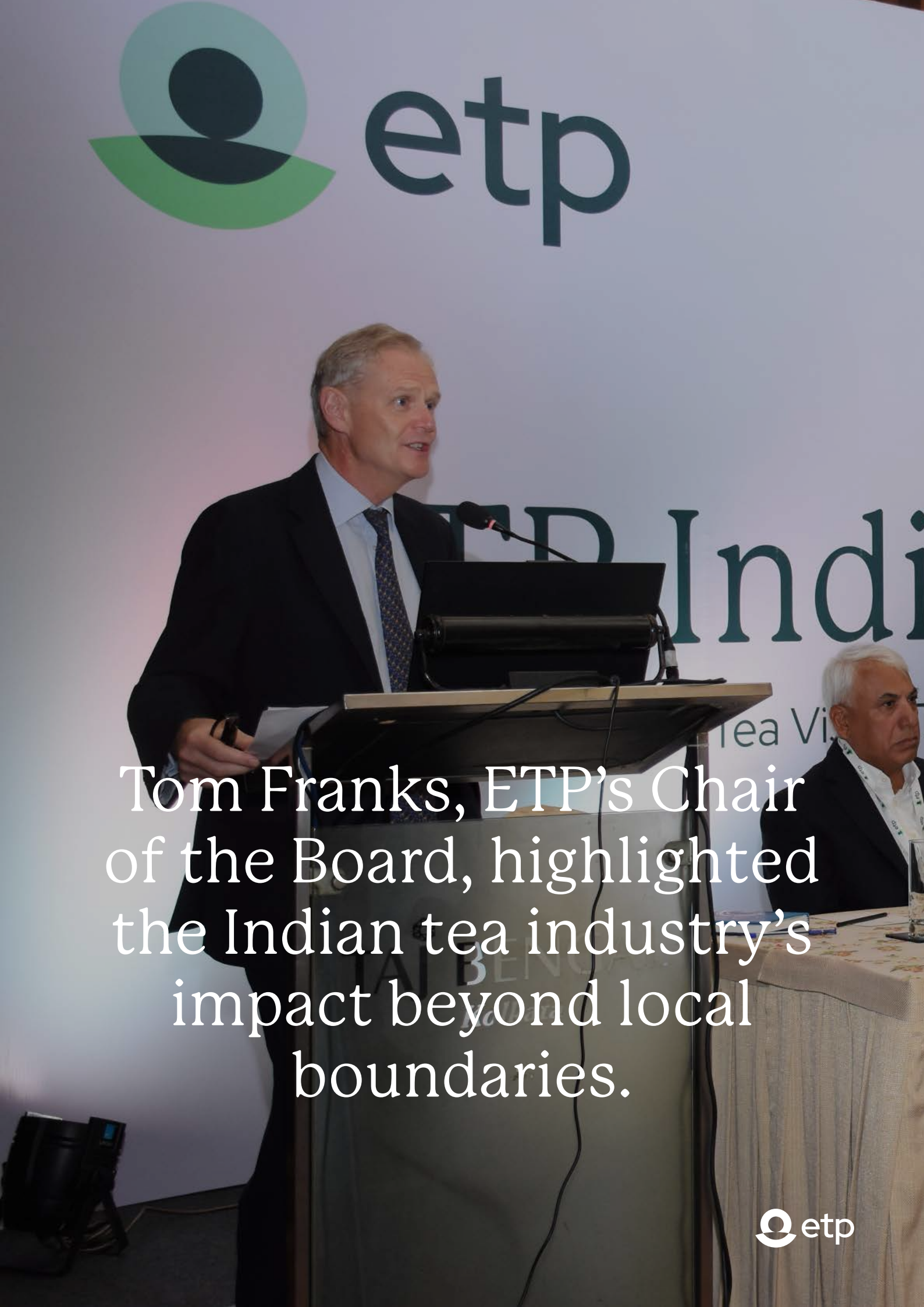


Opening session

Mr. Paban Singh Ghatowar, representing the Assam Chah Majdoor Sangh (ACMS), acknowledged his role as a representative for individuals whose livelihoods are intricately tied to the tea plant. He shared the distinctive demographics of the industry, with a majority of 60-65% women in its workforce. Mr. Ghatowar spoke about the tea bush's pivotal role in the lives of those reliant on the tea industry, highlighting its significance for workers and, consequently, consumers. Advocating for collaborative efforts and resource mobilisation, he called for sustained prosperity in the industry. Mr. Ghatowar appealed to the government to create more employment opportunities and implement policies benefiting all stakeholders in the tea sector. Additionally, he pointed out the noteworthy fact that despite challenges, there have been no demonstrations against price hikes in the industry.

Mr. Naba Kumar Das, Ex-Chief Secretary Govt. of Assam & Ex-Chairman Tea Board of India, spoke about the impact of global climate changes on tea, highlighting the necessity of promoting the crop's sustainability. He called for government intervention to ensure the well-being of tea workers and improve living conditions. Mr. Das presented findings illustrating a significant disparity in the value chain, with retailers garnering the highest profit above 50%, while workers receive a profit of less than 1%. He acknowledged that these numbers required fact-checking and updating.

Mr. Arun Singh from Tea Vision Trust highlighted the tea industry as the exclusive producer of a healthy product and underscored its unique position as the only ecologically sustainable one. Despite these positive aspects, Mr. Singh acknowledged the current crisis faced by the industry. He called for collaboration with all stakeholders to foster innovation and adapt to new challenges, ensuring the sustainability and profitability of the sector. Using an analogy that caught the audience's attention, he depicted the tea bush's roots as the workers and producers, highlighting the significance of the plant's wellness for the wellbeing of everyone associated with it.



Tom Franks, ETP's Chair of the Board, highlighted the Indian tea industry's impact beyond local boundaries.

The Impacts of Policy on the Tea Sector in Assam

Session two

Ms. Srividhya Sainathan presented the objectives of ETP's Policy Review of India, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of the policy ecosystem, serving as a reference guide, creating a repository of information, and identifying roles for ETP. The methodology involved a secondary desk review of policies, laws and schemes pertaining to tea industry and engagements with key stakeholders at all levels. However, the report acknowledged limitations, including the exclusion of Small Tea Growers (STGs) from the review, constraints in the number of interviewees, and community members' reluctance to discuss sensitive topics, among others. A summary of key findings was presented and is found below:

Area	Key findings
Sustainability and compliance reporting	• Limited understanding and awareness of frameworks • Potential difficulties in meeting Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) • BRSR could simplify reporting requirements
Economics	• Changes to the Plantation Labour Act • Missed opportunities in the Tea Promotion and Development Bill • A critical analysis of the new Labour Codes is required • Challenges in accessing local government schemes
Equality	• Awareness gaps on gender-based violence and harassment • Producers encounter challenges in accessing government support • Communities face difficulties in accessing welfare schemes
Enviornment	• Policy measures are underway to strengthen climate resilience • The industry is aware of the need to act on the environment but is facing challenges • There is a need for uniformity in standards

Prabir Battacharya, Tea Association of India, urged ETP to work with and represent all tea stakeholders to the Indian government.

Panel discussion

Ms. Sainathan highlighted that the findings and feedback from the Roundtable's panel discussion and breakout session would be used to feed into the recommendations highlighted in ETP's Policy Review of the Indian Tea Sector.

After the presentation, a panel discussion was chaired by Mr. Brian Lainoff (ETP). Panellists included Mr. Prabir Bhattacharya (Tea Association of India), Mr. Arijit Raha (Indian Tea Association), Mr. Jagjeet Singh Kandal (IDH), and Ms. Sainathan.

The first question posed to the panellists asked them to highlight the significant policy challenges faced by the tea sector in India. Panellists discussed climate change as a major issue leading to substantial disruptions in tea production. They also highlighted the absence of a clear policy for tea plantations in government schemes, emphasising the need for more effective implementation of existing policies. The panel highlighted the heavily regulated nature of the tea industry and called for comprehensive amendments. Furthermore, they noted that many tea gardens falling under the Panchayat (Local Self-Government) render numerous government schemes inapplicable.

Below: Members of the panel discussed the signficant policy challenges faced by the tea sector in India.



The second question posed to the panellists concerned the awareness among the workers of the welfare schemes available to them. Mr. Jagjeet Singh Kandal highlighted that there are more than 70 welfare schemes related to food, health, ICDS, and pension public workers. However, despite the multitude of schemes, awareness remains very limited. The panellists urged ETP and ITA to create awareness about the available schemes. They emphasised the need for grassroots mobilisers and local officers to facilitate awareness and transcribe the action in the ground. Mr. Raha agreed that there were shortcomings from the side of Government, noting a lack of emphasis, the ambiguous nature of the schemes, and the absence of a consolidated list available to the garden or even to its workers outlining the schemes accessible to them.

Finally, the panellists were asked to suggest potential roles ETP and others can play in closing the gaps highlighted in the policy review. Mr. Bhattacharya urged ETP to work with and represent all tea stakeholders to the government. By doing this, ETP can convey the concerns and needs of the community and industry to the Government. The panellists expressed confidently that Government would be more attentive to the voices of the community and industry when stakeholders are collectively represented. This underscores the importance of collaboration and advocacy in addressing the challenges faced by the tea sector.

The session concluded with a breakout session where all attendees could identify the challenges arising from policy in the Indian tea sector and the roles that ETP and others could take to address these challenges. This exercise informed the completion of ETP's Regulatory and Policy Review of the Indian Tea Sector.

Below left: Attendees discuss the potential roles for ETP and others to address the challenges facing the tea sector.

Below right: Prabir Bhattacharya, Tea Association of India





Ensuring Social Protection in Tea Estates

Session three

The main aim of this session was to highlight ETP's Plantation Community Empowerment Programme's (PCEP) ability to streamline social protection through the implementation of Community Development Forums (CDFs).

PCEP aims to improve the socio-economic wellbeing of tea workers and their families, the productivity of estates, and the relationship between management and workforces. It uses dedicated grassroots forums that bring community members and plantation management together to jointly resolve local issues.

The first part of the session included representatives of the CDFs at three estates where PCEP is being implemented. The representatives shared their reflections on their experiences of working on CDF programmes.

Offering a community perspective, Ms. Anima Tanti, a member of the CDF at Behora Tea Estate (Mcleod Russel India Limited), shared insights into the positive impact of the CDF, emphasising its role in fostering confidence among women members. She highlighted key initiatives, including the implementation of a ban on alcohol and the creation of learning opportunities for students who had dropped out. Ms. Tanti also emphasised the CDF's contribution to improving communication between management and workers and resolving issues such as wage deductions for female workers during their menstrual cycles.
local issues.

Ms. Sangeeta Karketta, a member of the Bukhial Estate (Mcleod Russel India Limited) CDF since 2019, highlighted the positive impact of CDF initiatives. She shared about the role of learning centres under the PCEP, providing remedial learning opportunities for girls and promoting adult literacy. CDF raised awareness about Self-Help Groups, encouraging women to invest, and played a crucial role in promoting livelihood diversification among workers to enhance their income. CDF interventions successfully addressed issues like alcoholism and worked to reduced domestic violence within the estate. Ms. Kerketta expressed gratitude for the initiatives, recognising their role in instilling confidence within the community.

Below left: Ms. Sangeeta Karketta, a member of the Bukhial Estate.

Ms. Koleshwari Tanti, a member of CDF at Addabarie Estate (Luxmi Tea) CDF, spoke about the transformative power of education in shaping a positive future for children in tea estates. She believes that CDF can be a catalyst for positive change within the tea garden. Through CDF initiatives, they have collected data on social security documents (such as Aadhar cards) and assisted in correcting details. Ms. Tanti looks forward to collaborative efforts with the management to collectively contribute to the welfare of tea workers and the productivity of the tea estate.

Below right: Ms. Koleshwari Tanti, a member of CDF at Addabarie Estate.

Mr. Rajesh Patra, a Senior Welfare Officer at Borbam Tea Estate (Goodricke Group Limited) outlined the positive impact of CDF, which encompasses community-centric solutions empowering over 3,000 individuals. He highlighted that the PCEP initiatives have fostered improved relations between workers and management, positively influencing productivity, and mitigating conflicts and lockouts.





Panel discussion

The second part of the session focused on strengthening the industry's sustainability effort. Jenny Costelloe led a panel that included Suzy Garraghan (Taylors of Harrogate), Bhargav Bothra (McLeod Russel India Ltd.), Nibir Bordoloi (Luxmi Tea Private Ltd.), Anjan Bordoloi (ETP), Jyotish Gohain (GIZ), and Jennifer Liang (IDeA NE).

The panel highlighted the benefits of CDFs in facilitating a dialogue between management and workers, actively encouraging the community to participate and collaborate on managing complex issues, utilising and accessing valuable resources, and encouraging the youth to contribute to the growth of the industry.

Panel members including Ms. Garraghan and Mr. Gohain highlighted their motivation for supporting the programme, citing the participatory, democratic, and consultative approach and the programme's success stories highlighted by the representatives who shared their experiences.

Left: Ms. Suzy Garraghan, Taylors of Harrogate.

Top right: Ms. Jenny Costelloe and Ms. Jennifer Liang discuss the CDF model with the panel.

Bottom middle: Mr. Nibir Bordoloi, Luxmi Tea Private Ltd.

Bottom right: Mr. Jyotish Gohain, GIZ.











Rajesh Patra applauded ETP's Plantation Community Empowerment Programme for fostering improved relations between workers and management.

Ensuring Gender Equality and Women's Safety in Tea Sector

Session four

This session commenced with a presentation by Ms. Jenny Costelloe (ETP), who provided a global perspective on gender issues in the tea sector. Quoting Carl Sagan, she emphasised, "An absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Jenny presented statistical evidence of gender-based violence (GBV) experienced by women worldwide, with a notable 34% of women reporting having experienced GBV in Assam (unreported cases would imply the actual number is higher). Jenny highlighted further data signalling gender disparities in literacy and wages among women workers in Assam's tea plantations. Exploring root causes such as recruitment practices, temporary contracts, and low wages, she recognised the need for a comprehensive solution to addressing gender inequality in the tea sector. This solution, Jenny urged, entails acknowledging the problem, developing and implementing policies, re-evaluating employment contracts, supporting access to social protection, promoting education and empowerment, and enabling alternative incomes where wages cannot increase. Jenny concluded by citing the International Labour Organization, noting that enterprises with inclusive cultures and policies have a 63% enhanced probability of achieving increased profitability and productivity.

Below: Jenny Costelloe, Executive Director of ETP, highlights what can be done in tea to enable gender equality and ensure women's safety.



Panel discussion

Ms. Kanta Singh, representing UN Women, delivered key insights on ensuring women's safety. She shared that GBV should not be considered in isolation, highlighting its impact on women's mobility and its normalization in daily life. Ms. Singh proposed solutions, including women's empowerment, leadership, and collaborative strategies to strengthen women's voices.

Finally, Ms. Ranjana Das chaired a panel on ensuring women's safety and access to justice. The panel consisted of Ms. Manisha Majumdar (Womens Safety Accelerator Fund), Ms. Poulomi Pal (UN Women), Dr. Madhulika Jonathan (UNICEF), and Mr. Tom Franks (ETP).

Dr. Jonathan urged for investments in women's safety to enhance sector productivity, with a specific focus on addressing child marriage cases in tea gardens. Stressing community mobilisation, she highlighted the significance of educating adolescent girls about the consequences of early marriage and their rights. Additionally, Dr. Jonathan spoke about the importance of addressing violence against boys, broadening the focus beyond girls and women. Ms. Pal and Ms. Majumdar focused on the interconnectedness of domestic violence, workplace violence, and online violence, stressing the need for awareness, mobilisation, collaboration among stakeholders, and commitment from unions and the tea board to address GBV. Tom's concluding note highlighted his own experience managing a company's response to human rights issues. He urged the audience to prioritise the challenges, enable reporting of cases, provide comprehensive support, invest in education, and ensure women's representation in leadership positions.

Below: Ms. Ranjana Das chaired a panel on ensuring women's safety and access to justice.



Discussing the Future of the Indian Tea Sector and the Role of Small Tea Growers

Session five

This session commenced by acknowledging the pivotal role of Small Tea Growers (STGs) in the industry, now contributing to more than 50% of production. Often referred to as the industry's unseen contributors and viewed as the future, STGs play a crucial role in shaping its trajectory. The session also considered the impact of climate on the future of tea.

Mr. Joydeep Phukan, Secretary of Tea Research Association (TRA), introduced the existing challenges facing STGs and outlined TRA's approach. Mr. Phukan highlighted how STGs initially operated without government support or technical assistance until formal support was piloted in 2004, providing on-site training to STGs in Assam and West Bengal. The project's success served as a catalyst, encouraging increased engagement of STGs in tea cultivation. In 2011, TRA opened an STG training infrastructure, and in collaboration with ETP to provide technical training to STGs. In 2017, the Government of Assam allocated funds to establish Research and Development Centres at Tocklai for Assam's STGs focusing on plant production, improvement, protection, and diversification.

Below: Mr. Joydeep Phukan, Tea Research Association.



Panel discussion

The session concluded with a panel discussion chaired by Mr. Nirbhay Singh (ETP) focusing on the challenges facing STGs approaches to carbon resilient agricultural practices, low carbon tea, and exploring the production of carbon credits by STGs. The panel included Ms. Etti Khanna (ERDAIllumine), Mr. Ganesh Babu (Boomitra), Mr. Yash Goel (Bought Leaf Factory representative), Mr. Golap Buragohain (Small Tea Grower representative), Dr. Rossitza Krueger (GIZ), and Mr. Atul Rastogi (Luxmi Tea).

Mr. Buragohain summarised the structural challenges confronting STGs including compliance and price management, initially exacerbated by a lack of institutional support. Limited knowledge of chemicals posed another significant challenge environmentally. All panellists acknowledged the adverse effects of irregular rainfall on the industry. Stressing the critical need for environmental conservation, the panel highlighted the importance of safeguarding and sustaining both the tea industry and the livelihoods of those dependent on it. The panel highlighted opportunities to reduce the carbon footprint of STGs. They introduced various strategies for carbon-resilient agricultural practices and low-carbon tea production, along with exploring the potential for STGs to generate carbon credits.

Below left: Mr. Golap Buroghain, Small Tea Grower representative.

Below right: Mr. Arun Narain Singh, Tea Vision Trust, engages with the panel on opportunities to reduce the carbon footprint of the Indian tea sector.





Responsible Business Conduct in the Tea Sector in India

Session six

The final session of the Roundtable focused on Responsible Business Conduct in the tea sector in India. The purpose of the session was twofold:

- to explore the progress India has made in mandating company reporting on responsible business behaviour; and
- to identify ways ETP can support the Indian tea sector, an essential sourcing origin for ETP members.

Ms. Nandini Sharma and Ms. Neha Tomar from the Centre for Responsible Business (CRB) opened the session by outlining the necessity of frameworks on responsible business conduct. They then invited the delegates to share their insights, with responses highlighting factors such as regulatory pressure, investor demand, international commitments, stakeholder expectations, market access, and consumer awareness.

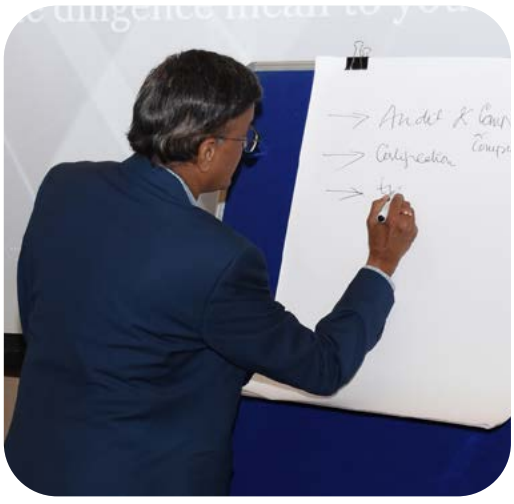
Ms. Sharma presented a comprehensive overview of the evolution of Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) in India since 2011, beginning with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs' National Voluntary Guidelines on Social, Environmental, and Economic Responsibilities of Business. The progression continued with the declaration of National Guidelines for Responsible Business Conduct (NGRBC) in 2019 which encompasses nine principles spanning social, environmental, and economic aspects. This is followed by has Securities and Exchange Board of India's (SEBI) introduction of the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) Core in 2020, incorporating "reasonable assurance" from third parties and value chain reporting.

Breakout session

Following the presentation, the Roundtable moved onto an interactive breakout session, dividing delegates in the room into three groups: buyers, producers, and civil society. Each group was assigned specific questions to reflect upon, as outlined in the table below:

Question	Buyer insights	Producer insights	Civil society insights
What, in one word, does supply chain due diligence mean to you?	• Bureaucracy • Transparency • Legislation • Compliance • Data Collection • Assurance • Validation • Responsibility • Risk Mitigation • Cost	• Audit and Compliance • Certification • Transparency • Marketability • Customer Trust • Confidence	• Paperwork • Bureaucracy • Responsibility • Audit and Assurance • Fairness • Transparency
How can Indian suppliers gain a competitive advantage?	• Risk identification • Due diligence • Putting the system in place	• Differentiated product • Market access • Government facilitation • Logistic support	• Reduced reputational risk • Consumer duty of care • Cost of responsible business

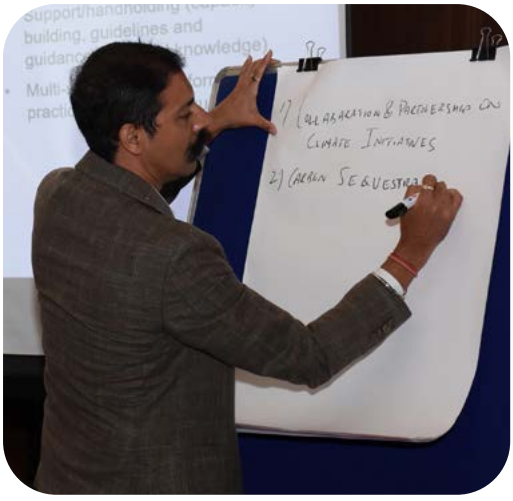




Below: Attendees define supply chain due dilligence.

Question	Buyer insights	Producer insights	Civil society insights
What are supplier expectations of buyers?	• Did not discuss	• Profitable price • Assistance on certification • Long-term business commitment • Link buying to sustainability	• Better prices • Long-term contracts • Volume commitment • Traceability of tea • Unified global standards • Shorter price realisation
What are the input work areas regarding collaboration, handholding, and multistakeholder platforms?	• Training for companies • Standard methodology • Aligning to certification • Shared database	• Collaboration and partnership on climate initiatives • Mechanisation • Drip irrigation • Transparency on sourcing and buyer practices • Buyer-supplier dialogues • Pest management and plant protection	• Collaboration in agricultural practices and a downstream trajectory • Support for a standardised BRSR toolkit • A multistakeholder platform to rationalise frameworks and convene discussions on trends and policies

Below: Attendees discuss opportunities to collaborate on responsible business practices.






Nandini Sharma, Centre for Responsible Business, presented a comprehensive overview of the evolution of Responsible Business Conduct in India.

Conclusion

The Roundtable was attended by some of the most important stakeholders in the Indian tea sector and buyers of tea from the UK and Europe. With over 100 attendees across two days, sector stakeholders advocated for continued conversation, calling for ETP to bring the sector together going forward. ETP has identified, through the Roundtable, several ways to convene and catalyse the Indian tea sector:

- Continue to implement programmes in tea estates that improve basic services and strengthen worker-management relationships through community-based institution building as demonstrated by ETP's Plantation Community Empowerment Programme;
- Raise awareness of the more than 70 welfare schemes available to tea workers;
- Support and mainstream social protection programmes in tea estates and liaise with local governments to achieve the greatest impact;
- Support Small Tea Growers to achieve climate resilience and adopt low carbon technology;
- Convene stakeholders to ensure women's safety in the tea sector and strengthen redressal mechanisms;
- Encourage transparency in the tea sector through supporting responsible business disclosure; and
- Explore continued collaboration and partnership, seeking industry and government support to achieve a thriving, socially just, and environmentally sustainable tea sector in India.

Below: ETP's India Country team from left to right: Bharat Nayak, Nirbhay Singh, Kamini Gohain, Ranjana Das, Joshila Horo, Neha Das, Payal Sirsat, Anjan Bordoloi, and Probin Baruah.




Jenny Costelloe, ETP's Executive Director, said the challenges facing the tea sector require shared responsibility and shared solutions - ETP will continue to convene and catalyse the sector to find these.



Moran Tea Estate,
Assam, at dusk.

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