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Tea-Growing Communities Across the Lifecycle

ETP Factsheet

Background

In tea-growing communities,[*] the lives of children, young people and older persons are shaped in different ways across the lifecycle, with each group facing distinct opportunities, challenges and risks. While not all household members are directly engaged in tea production, their lives are shaped by the social and economic conditions of tea-growing regions. In many tea-producing regions, gaps in services, limited livelihood diversification and intergenerational dependency on tea plantation employment shape life trajectories, affecting children's access to education and child labour risks, young people's employment choices and migration patterns, and older workers' economic security and access to healthcare and social protection. Recognising these interconnected lifecycle dynamics is essential for identifying human rights risks in the tea supply chain and for supporting resilient, inclusive tea-growing communities across generations.

This factsheet draws on available evidence to highlight the challenges and opportunities experienced at different stages of life by tea-growing communities. The evidence base remains uneven across contexts, with significant variations in data availability and quality across countries. As such, the findings are indicative of broader patterns and risks rather than universally applicable across all tea-growing contexts. ETP adopts a rights-based and intersectional approach and is committed to working with partners to uphold and advance the rights of tea-growing communities in all their diversity, including children, youth and older persons.

Children in tea-growing communities

Maternal health, maternity protection and access to early childcare support are critical determinants of children's wellbeing. In tea-growing communities in some contexts, limited access to paid maternity leave, poor living and working conditions, and barriers to maternal healthcare can negatively affect maternal health, infant nutrition and children's early development. Women in casual or temporary employment are more likely to work throughout pregnancy and miss antenatal appointments because they cannot forego a day's wages.

In India, tea plantation workers are legally entitled to primary healthcare under the Plantation Labour Act, including maternity care and essential medicines. However, access to quality healthcare services is not always consistent in practice. Despite longstanding challenges, maternal health outcomes have improved significantly in Assam over the past two decades, with the maternal mortality ratio falling from 490 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2001–03, to 125 in 2020–22 at the state level.[1]

Once children are born, access to postnatal care and quality childcare plays an important role in early childhood development. In many tea-growing regions, estate-run childcare facilities such as Child Development Centres or Early Childhood Development Centres exist, often supported by funders and civil society organisations, and provide an important service for working families. However, the availability and quality of these services can vary. For example, reports from tea estates in Assam in 2016 highlighted concerns about some estate-run childcare facilities, including poor hygiene standards and limited access to clean water,[2] although improvements have been made in many locations over the past decade.

[*] 'Tea-growing communities' refers to people living and working in tea-producing regions, including plantation (estate) workers, smallholder farmers, hired labour (permanent, temporary and seasonal), and others whose livelihoods are directly or indirectly linked to tea production, as well as their households and dependents, who may not be directly engaged in tea work.

Where childcare services are limited, unavailable, or perceived as inadequate, families may rely on informal care arrangements with older siblings, grandparents, other relatives or neighbours whilst parents work. In some cases, women may have little choice but to bring infants with them when they go plucking, exposing babies to unsafe conditions and affecting women's productivity and earnings. Strengthening access to safe, reliable and high-quality childcare services therefore remains an important priority for supporting both children's wellbeing and women's participation in decent work. In Rwanda, targeted investment and multi-stakeholder partnerships are helping to address these challenges, with the establishment of mobile crèches and early childhood centres on or near tea plantations which provide safe care, nutrition and early learning for young children while parents work.[3]

Economic vulnerability within tea households directly shapes children's outcomes. Children growing up in rural tea-growing communities can face multiple barriers affecting their wellbeing, including limited access to quality education, healthcare and safe living environments. Access to quality education can be negatively affected by factors such as the cost of transport, educational materials and uniforms, as well as distance and broader social barriers. A 2020 study by Save the Children in Sri Lanka[4] found that estate worker households were in a significantly worse financial position than smallholder farmer households and that these household income inequalities were reflected in poorer outcomes for estate workers' children. Children of estate workers were more likely to drop out of school and to experience nutrition- and hygiene-related health problems, with more than one in five children found to only eat two meals or less per day. Children living in estate housing also reported feeling significantly less safe than those not living in estates. The most frequently cited risks among both tea farmer and estate worker households in the study related to alcohol use, natural disasters and illegal drugs.

Girls and young women living in tea-growing communities can face heightened risks of human rights violations, including child marriage and human trafficking, linked to gender inequality and unsafe living conditions. Earlier reports from Assam in 2013 found cases of girls being trafficked to cities such as Delhi and Mumbai after being promised domestic work, only to face exploitation and violence.[5] More recently, ETP's Plantation Community Empowerment Programme (PCEP) has been found to identify and address such risks, demonstrated by a recent case of participants of the PCEP Community Development Forums taking action together to intervene and prevent young girls from being trafficked.

Box 1: Child labour definition

Under international standards, child labour refers to work that deprives children of their childhood, potential or dignity, or that harms their physical or mental development. According to ILO Conventions No. 138 (Minimum Age) and No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour), this includes work performed by children below the minimum working age (generally 15 years old), as well as any work undertaken by people under 18 that is hazardous, exploitative or likely to harm their health, safety, morals or education. The worst forms of child labour include slavery and practices similar to slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, forced or compulsory labour, the use of children in prostitution or illicit activities, and hazardous work.

There is evidence indicating risks of child labour, a serious human rights violation, in tea supply chains in some contexts. In tea-growing regions, child labour may include hazardous work on tea farms, carrying heavy loads, handling agrochemicals, using sharp tools, working long hours, or any work (paid or unpaid) that interferes with school attendance. Children of both tea estate workers and smallholder farmers can be at risk of being withdrawn from school during peak harvesting season to help with tea harvesting work. However, risks tend to be higher in the smallholder sector, where production is family-based and oversight is limited, compared to large estates which operate under formal HR systems, age verification requirements and third-party audits and certification schemes.

The evidence base on child labour in tea varies significantly across countries and contexts, and available data is not always directly comparable. Various sources, including the US Department of Labor,[6] have identified risks of child labour in tea production across a number of countries, although the nature and extent of these risks vary significantly by context.

In Kenya's smallholder tea sector, children may take part in light household agricultural activities, particularly during peak harvesting periods when labour demand is high. While this is often part of family livelihood strategies rather than formal employment, evidence suggests that labour shortages, poverty and limited access to childcare can increase the likelihood of children assisting with tea plucking or related tasks, especially on labour-intensive family farms.[7]

In some contexts, these risks are higher. In Malawi, the tea-growing areas have the highest child labour prevalence rate (43%), which is related to the increased vulnerability of smallholder tea farmers, due to various factors including high price volatility.[8] In May 2025, the Tea Association of Malawi (TAML) launched a new policy to reinforce its commitment to preventing child labour in the tea industry, with clearer guidelines and stricter enforcement measures.[9]

Box 2: Improving the lives of children and their families in Assam

Over the past decade, the ETP and UNICEF Improving Lives Programme has strengthened child protection, education and maternal health outcomes in almost a quarter of Assam's tea estates, reaching more than 300,000 people, including approximately 137,000 children and adolescents. The programme has now finished its third and final phase (2022-25), with support from JDE, Ostfriesische Tee Gesellschaft GmbH & Co. KG (OTG), Taylors of Harrogate and The Starbucks Foundation. According to the programme's final internal report, the key results include:

- **Maternal and child health and nutrition outcomes:** Uptake of iron and folic acid supplementation during pregnancy increased (from 41% in 2019 to ~90% in 2024), alongside improvements in frontline nutrition capacity and child health services (86% of children under five reached through growth monitoring; 99% of severe acute malnutrition cases treated). Child feeding also improved, with adequate diets among children aged 6–23 months rising from 10.7% to ~61%, and mothers' knowledge of dietary diversity increasing from 13% to 77%.
- **Strengthened child protection systems:** All 205 participating estates adopted Child Rights and Business Principles and family-friendly policies, established child protection policies and referral mechanisms, and strengthened collaboration with district child protection authorities.
- **Improved education and reduced early marriage:** The proportion of adolescents (aged 15–19 years) in education has risen from 55% in 2019 to 69% in 2021, while early marriage among girls (aged 15–19 years) fell from 5% to 2% in the same period.
- **Youth participation and leadership:** Between 2022 and 2025, more than 32,000 adolescents joined around 529 clubs or collectives for discussions on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and child rights. Over 7,800 adolescents were engaged as "resilience ambassadors", linking disaster risk reduction with youth leadership.

Together, these interventions demonstrate how coordinated action across communities, estates, and local authorities can improve outcomes for children and youth in tea-growing communities.

Youth

Tea work is widely viewed by young people in tea-growing communities as an unattractive and low-status employment option. Wages are often low, the labour is physically demanding, contracts are often insecure, and working conditions can be unsafe, with workers exposed to harsh weather and environmental hazards such as leeches. In Rwanda, a study commissioned by the Rwandan National Agricultural Export Development Board (NAEB) together with ETP also found that long working hours, limited use of technology and mechanisation, and work extending into the evening further reduce the sector's appeal to young people.[10] Similarly, in Kenya, research from Rainforest Alliance indicates that younger generations often perceive tea work as physically demanding and offering limited financial returns compared to opportunities in urban areas or other sectors.[11] In some contexts, tea harvesting is also associated with low social status, and workers may experience stigma or discrimination within wider society.

Young people from estate communities often experience barriers in accessing more attractive and higher-value roles within the tea sector. Unequal access to education and limited opportunities to develop technical and leadership skills can restrict career progression for estate youth. Even where young people attain higher levels of education, many still choose to pursue opportunities outside the sector. Barriers are often shaped by intersecting factors such as gender and ethnic origin. In Sri Lanka, for example, supervisory, technical, administrative, and estate management positions are typically male-dominated and frequently held by individuals from outside estate communities, whilst the lowest-paid harvesting roles are overwhelmingly performed by women from historically marginalised Malaiyaga Tamil communities.

As a result, many young people in tea-growing regions aspire to livelihoods beyond the tea sector, seeking opportunities that offer greater dignity, independence and social mobility. Increasing youth migration to urban areas, into sectors such as tourism, transport and retail, is common across multiple tea-growing contexts.

These dynamics are contributing to labour shortages and an ageing tea workforce. In Sri Lanka, annual labour decline rates of 3–5% have been recorded across different tea-growing regions, contributing to estate productivity challenges.[12] In Darjeeling, India, the average age of tea workers is reported to have increased from 38 to 47 years old.[13] To address these labour shortages, some tea producers are increasingly relying on migrant workers hired on a casual basis, which can introduce additional human rights risks.

Box 3: Pathways to tea estate leadership for youth in Sri Lanka

Under ETP's Women in Leadership programme, the 'Empower U' initiative is creating new career pathways for young women and men from tea estate worker families by preparing them for staff roles within Talawakelle Tea Estates (TTE), part of the Hayleys Plantations.

The initiative was promoted across 16 TTE estates through outreach and awareness campaigns, attracting more than 200 applications from motivated and qualified youth. One hundred candidates were shortlisted to receive training in gender equality, gender-based violence awareness, youth leadership and career guidance.

Following training, 42 young people (25 women and 17 men) were selected as trainees. Participants received both classroom and practical training across estate operations, including fieldwork, factory processes and administrative functions. They also engaged in capacity-building sessions with government agencies, civil society organisations and industry experts to strengthen technical skills, professional confidence and leadership capacity.

After successfully completing their internships, the youth will be offered estate trainee positions from October 2025. This ground-breaking initiative represents a significant shift

in Sri Lanka's plantation sector, where opportunities for estate youth to progress into estate staff supervisory and management roles have historically been limited.

Older people

Evidence on the situation for older people in tea-growing communities in countries other than India is limited. However, demographic trends suggest workforces are ageing across multiple tea producing regions. In smallholder tea settings, farmers are often older, with many continuing to work or relying on subsistence agriculture for survival. In Kenya, for example, the average age of a farmer is widely cited as around 60 years,[14] although these landowners frequently hire casual labourers for tea plucking, often young women who migrate to tea-growing areas in search of work.

In estate settings in India and Sri Lanka, permanent workers who retire or become physically unable to meet plucking targets may face uncertainty around access to housing and services linked to their employment. Estate housing, rations, fuel, and access to water and electricity are commonly provided as part of the estate employment package. In India, when a worker retires or can no longer work, these benefits may be at risk of being withdrawn unless the permanent position is transferred to another family member, a practice that can contribute to intergenerational ties to estate labour. Older people on estates can become dependent on relatives or estate management for housing and income, and where youth outmigration is high, some may be left without reliable support. In India, older casual, temporary and migrant workers have been found to encounter additional barriers in accessing health, welfare and pension benefits, increasing their risk of poverty in old age.[Error! Bookmark not defined.]

Tea estate workers can face barriers in accessing pensions in later life. In India, retired workers are legally entitled to pensions through employer contributions to a Provident Fund, while in Sri Lanka, the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) provides a legal mechanism for retirement savings. In practice, however, some older workers in both countries face challenges in accessing and managing their funds. Even when contributions are properly remitted, older workers may have limited control over their pensions, and in some cases, funds may be spent by family members, leaving them financially vulnerable. As a result, they may continue to work in daily wage roles despite declining health or disability. In Assam, a landscape study conducted by ETP for PCEP which engaged 688 older people and persons with disabilities, found that difficulties in accessing pensions were a major source of stress for retired workers. This was often compounded by financial dependence on family members when they could no longer contribute to household income, which in some cases contributed to neglect and abuse by family members. Some also described a sense of exclusion from estate and community decision-making processes.

Older women in tea-growing communities may face heightened insecurity when they can no longer work. Estate housing is frequently tied to the registered (often male) worker, placing widows and single older women at greater risk of losing their homes if they cannot provide a working replacement. Women are also more likely to have worked in low-paid, informal or interrupted employment due to caregiving responsibilities, limiting access to pensions and savings and increasing their risk of poverty and dependence in older age. Some may continue working despite declining health while caring for grandchildren when younger family members migrate for work. These dynamics illustrate how ageing, gender, employment status and migration intersect to shape vulnerability within tea-growing communities.

Addressing these issues requires not only strong legal frameworks, such as the EPF in Sri Lanka and the Provident Fund in India, but also effective enforcement and complementary measures by employers, government, and communities to support older

workers in managing and safeguarding their entitlements. Some Sri Lankan estate companies have introduced elder care centres, and government reforms are gradually improving housing and pension protections, but ongoing attention is needed to ensure that older residents can access and retain the benefits they are entitled to.

ETP's approach

ETP takes an intersectional and human rights-based approach to addressing risks and opportunities across the lifecycle in tea-growing communities. Recognising that children's wellbeing, youth aspirations and older people's quality of life are interconnected, ETP works collaboratively with partners across the tea supply chain to advance and uphold the rights of tea-growing communities in all their diversity. This includes strengthening the systems, policies and private-sector practices needed to ensure inclusive access to education, decent work, leadership pathways and social protection across generations.

ETP prioritises women's and youth empowerment as key drivers of intergenerational change. Programmes such as Women in Leadership in Sri Lanka, the Plantation Community Empowerment Programme and the Improving Lives programme in India, and Our Tea Our Voice in Kenya, Rwanda and Indonesia, promote women's and young people's leadership, voice and economic empowerment within tea communities and workplaces. By strengthening women's access to resources, representation and decision-making, ETP's work also delivers positive ripple effects for children's health, nutrition and education outcomes. Through programming, policy engagement and private-sector partnerships, ETP aims to contribute to resilient, inclusive tea-growing communities and to a tea sector that is thriving, socially just and environmentally sustainable for generations to come.

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