Abstract
While the tea industry represents one of the earliest global supply chains, contemporary
globalisation has increased vulnerabilities for tea plantation workers. At the same time,
those functioning higher along the chain engaged in the buying, processing, distribution
and retailing of tea, such as the auction houses, blending, packaging and branding
companies usually being multinationals, have benefited significantly from the increased
transactions of tea world-wide. Indian and Sri Lankan tea plantations are among the top
global producers of tea. They employ the single largest organised formal workforce in
these countries with very limited role in the governance of these supply chains. Rather,
labour in this sector has historically been and continues to be beset with serious human
development deficits with regard to income, education, health and overall livelihood
status.

Fair trade certifications have aimed at improving the situation of plantation workers.
The fair trade movement started as an effort to challenge the unequal terms of exchange
for commodities from the global South. Fair trade certification along a set of social and
environmental standards now seeks to promote the well-being and empowerment of
farmers and workers in the global South. In South Asia, a few tea plantations have
obtained different types of fair trade certifications since the 1990s. It is unclear, though,
whether and how such certification influences the working conditions over and above
the standards and entitlements laid down in legislation and collective agreements. Can a
voluntarist development strategy challenge the structural poverty that South Asian tea
workers experience? Or does it remain a largely rhetorical concern associated with a
few symbolic and marginal changes, while retaining the same power relations in the
global supply chains?

We address these questions in a mixed methods comparative study of tea plantations in
North and South India, as well as Sri Lanka. Specifically, the paper focuses on the
influence of Fairtrade International’s certification on the wages, working conditions and
collective agency of tea estate workers. Primary data were generated through focus
groups discussions, semi-structured key informant interviews as well as a worker
survey.
Preliminary findings show that Fairtrade certification seems to make little difference for tea estate workers’ wages. Overall, it does not make a dent in plantation workers’ poor working conditions, either. Alongside other types of certification, however, it has improved occupational safety and health on tea estates. In addition, investments of the Fairtrade premium have a positive impact on workers’ household income, and committees for the governance of this premium offer a new platform to address workers’ grievances collectively.

We tentatively conclude that in order to address the structural causes of plantation labour’s poverty, workers need to drive the Fairtrade agenda more to address power hierarchies on the estate and in the wider tea supply chain. Fairtrade, trade unions, workers’ representatives and concerned NGOs have to work together with the government to counter the trends of globalisation that lead to unequal distribution of gains from trade while increasing work intensity on plantations to lower labour costs, undermine workers’ standards of living and trade union rights.

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