



SAAPE

South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication

20 May 2022

His Excellency António Guterres,
The Secretary General,
United Nations (UN),
UN Headquarters,
New York, United States

Subject: Open call to the United Nations on the occasion of International Tea Day, 21 May 2022

Your Excellency,

In reference to the International Tea Day (21 May) 2022, we, on behalf of small farmers, workers, tea farmers' cooperatives, workers' unions and grassroots organisations in South Asia, would like to submit this respectful yet urgent call to the United Nations, to engage without delay in ensuring fair trade and fair distribution of returns obtained from tea manufacturing and tea trade to plantation workers and tea growing peasants.

Millions of workers in South Asia are engaged in tea production and processing. Tea growing also provides employment and income to millions of smallholder growers, who supplement or even replace the production done by large tea estates in many countries. We consider that an active engagement of the United Nations with its member state governments, private sector groups and civil society organisations is a key to guarantee living wage and social protection benefits to workers, ensure decent working condition, end gender injustice, and provide fair price for produces from tea growing peasants. Amidst the reality that plantation workers in tea sector have been exploited and discriminated since history through low wage and absence of any social protection, a timely effort by the United Nations in influencing the state, private and non-state actors would promote and foster collective actions to implement activities in favour of sustainable consumption and production of tea, thus, respecting the rights of workers and peasants. Against this backdrop and in line with the theme of the International Tea Day this year "Tea and Fair Trade", we would like to submit the enclosed 'open call' to the United Nations for its effective engagement with its member states, private actors, national and international civil society organisation in ensuring the rights of men and women workers and peasants.

Yours sincerely,

Netra Prasad Timsina,
Regional Coordinator,
South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication
Gairidhara, Kathmandu, Nepal

20 May 2022, Kathmandu, Nepal

Open call to the United Nations, governments of tea producing countries, tea estates, tea processors, tea exporters and traders on the occasion of International Tea Day, May 21, 2022.

Tea workers and small-scale producers in South Asian countries call for a fair and equitable supply chain of the tea industry for sustainable production and consumption.

On the occasion of the United Nations International Tea Day May 21, 2022, the tea growers' association, tea workers' unions and civil society organizations of South Asia, primarily from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh, would like to make this call under the theme "Tea and Fair Trade". The goal of the day is to promote and foster collective action to implement activities in favor of sustainable consumption and production of tea and raise awareness of its importance in fighting hunger and poverty. The day aims to recognize the long history of tea and its deep cultural and economic significance around the world.

We also note that tea is the second most popular beverage in the world after water. Tea production and processing is a source of livelihood for millions of families in least developed and developing countries. Tea farming provides employment and income to millions of smallholder growers, supplementing or even replacing the production of large tea estates in many countries. Despite the increase of tea consumption in major producing countries, the per capita consumption is still low, suggesting that there is still considerable growth potential in these countries. Over the past decades, the global tea industry has seen rapid growth with a rising number of consumers worldwide. Although three quarters of the tea produced is consumed domestically, it is a commodity traded and exported widely. Tea export earnings support the economies of the major tea-producing countries and help them earn valuable foreign exchange by importing food and other essential materials. Moreover, tea is a commodity that contributes to the balance of payments in tea growing countries. The specific agro-ecological conditions of tea cultivation are at high risk for climate change. In order to ensure benefits for both people and the environment, the tea value chain must be sustainable at all stages, from field to cup.

The theme for this year's International Tea Day, "Tea and Fair Trade", is extremely relevant not only for enhancing trade access to international markets, but also for effectively addressing workers' rights and ensuring fair value distribution to small-scale tea growers. This will contribute towards achieving the sustainable development goals: No Poverty and Zero Hunger (Goal 1 and 2), Gender Equality (Goal 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (Goal 8), Reduced Inequality (Goal 10), Responsible Consumption and Production (Goal 12) and Climate Action (Goal 13). We also note that International Tea Day aims to draw the global attention of governments, private sectors and citizens towards the impact of global tea trade on the welfare of workers and growers.

Despite the contribution of the tea sector to livelihood, economy and ecology, the notion of fair supply and trade is largely absent. Tea growing areas in South Asia are affected by rampant poverty, gender discrimination, unfair wages, and unfair price of green leaves provided to small

scale growers, leading to unjust results in the production of one of the world's widely consumed beverages.

Given the fact that workers and small-scale growers are at the bottom of receiving end in the tea value chain and are the most discriminated and marginalized, we call upon the United Nations, governments of tea growing countries, tea estates and tea trading companies to respond to the following demands:

1. Ensure living wage for workers

i) Governments of South Asian tea growing countries:

(a) Ensure the implementation of the declared national minimum wage for the workers in all tea gardens of South Asian countries. Exclude in-kind benefits from minimum wage calculations in tea plantations as it puts workers on hunger strike.

(b) Wages should be determined and reviewed periodically based on scientific evidence (such as inflation in the economy) through a collective bargaining process. States must ensure that the collective bargaining process is not bypassed during the process of setting of wages and other social security benefits.

ii) Tea manufacturers and exporters: Ensure living income for small tea growers and workers. Work with producers to enable wages to increase to the living wage level, as determined by workers and their representatives (ensuring that those representatives allow the voice of women to be heard).

iii) Tea estates: Provide the basic social protection scheme in addition with the minimum wage determined by the Government of India for other sectors under the Labour Act. Ensure that workers' needs are genuinely represented in tripartite negotiations (between the workers' union, producers' association and government) such that they are able to earn enough and provided with social security to cover the basic needs. Promote transparency on the transactions of tea states so that workers understand what is going on in the tea estates.

iv) Tea trading companies (Buyers): Ensure that the workers in the tea estates and the processing factories from where the traders buy made tea are fairly compensated with living wage. Ensure that tea is priced sustainably and that the unfair trading practice is avoided during the sales of tea.

v) The United Nations Agencies – FAO and ILO: The UN agencies such as Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) should promote fair value chain from farm to cup of tea considering equity and justice at all level of supply chain so that tea industry becomes sustainable economically, socially and environmentally. The workers and small producers' basic rights must be protected, particularly the rights of women workers. International Labour Organisation (ILO) should monitor the issue of minimum and living wages.

2. End women and gender discrimination in tea business

i) Governments of South Asia: The provisions that discriminate women and men must be ended by ensuring that laws designed to protect women workers, such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Acts, are implemented. The specific health needs of women during menstruation, pregnancy, and maternity must be met indiscriminately and government should develop a mechanism for implementation of the policies. All the nation states should sign up to the United Nations' Women's Empowerment Principles (WEP). As a party to Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the South Asian Governments should ensure the implementation of women's equal right to work.

ii) Tea manufacturers and exporters: Include standards for gender issues in the code of conduct for suppliers and support them to realize these standards. Wherever possible, exporters should buy from women-owned produces or those that prioritize gender equity.

iii) Tea estates: (a) Tea estates must support more effective representation of women tea workers in workers' unions. Develop effective gender policies based on gender analysis and gender-disaggregated data must be maintained on work roles, wages and representation.

(b) Health and hygiene, especially reproductive health for women workers, are to be guaranteed. Provisions of adequate maternity leaves, low work burden post-maternity and at the time of menstruation, clean toilets in the fields, crèche facility or child care center, and nutritious food for mother and children must be arranged for. Ensure the statutory social security services designated by the government are provided to women workers.

iv) Trading companies (Buyers): Adhere to the United Nations' Women's Empowerment Principles (WEP). Work with producers to analyze unequal gender norms (such as concentration of women in the lowest paid jobs) on tea plantations and help them develop and deliver action plans to address such inequality and ensure upward mobility.

3. Maintain transparency and accountability to promote fairness in tea business

i) Governments: The governments in both the producing and the consuming countries should ensure transparency of the businesses and hold the companies accountable for protecting, respecting and fulfilling human rights in the value chains.

ii) Tea manufacturers and exporters: Ensure that the producers have created decent working environment in their gardens including the facilities of shelter, health and education facilities to the level of standard defined by the governments. The small growers must receive the fair price for their products particularly for the green leaf.

iii) Tea estates: Ensure that the producers have arranged for decent working environment in their gardens including the facilities of shelter, health and education facilities to the level of standard defined by the governments. Allow civil society organizations and workers unions to access tea estates to assess the conditions.

iv) Trading companies (Buyers): Publish the country and region of origin clearly on tea packaging. Publish supply chain information for tea – including all tiers of suppliers – and the distribution of the end consumer price at each stage.

v) UN Agencies – FAO and ILO: The FAO Intergovernmental Group (IGG) on tea should conduct study and make recommendations to the governments and private sector pressing on their obligations to maintain transparency and accountability in all level of supply chain in tea business.

4. Implement labour law provisions

i) Governments of South Asia:

(a) Strictly enforce the implementation of the provisions that were contained in the laws brought through hard-fought workers’ struggle. Strengthen appropriate standards and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that workers can report any violations on a regular basis without fear.

(b) State legislation, such as provisions of minimum wage and provident fund, should not be discriminatory against tea plantation workers and the state should ensure that labour laws are effectively implemented in the tea estates.

(c) Data of workers and peasants are to be maintained disaggregated at the level of gender, type of worker (regular/irregular) and land area of plantation to support policy making decisions. Registration process should be duly started by the local government.

(d) Casualization of labour is the major cause for denial of rights to workers. Hence, social security measures should be extended to informal workers in the sector to ensure decent work, good working condition and living income.

(e) The states should ease the process of registration of trade unions so that workers, both permanent and temporary, are provided with a unified voice in their struggle for better wage and living condition.

ii) Manufacturers and exporters: Favour suppliers who abide by the worker-friendly legal provisions and incentivize and enable others to do so. Engage with national and state governments to find practical solutions to challenges in implementing them.

iii) Tea estates: Implement worker-friendly requirements to an adequate standard to ensure decent living and working conditions of tea workers and their families.

iv) Traders (Buyers): Enable the implementation of the provisions that were contained in the laws brought through workers’ struggle by working with suppliers, government and civil society to press on the tea estates to provide decent housing, healthcare, water, sanitation and education through improved trading practices and external support. The core labour standards and practices of the destination countries should be applicable for tea workers and growers.

v) Civil Society and unions: Actively promote workers' human rights, including living wages, decent working conditions (such as healthy working hours and occupational health and safety), fair employment conditions (such as proper contracts and clear explanation of wages and deductions) and decent housing, healthcare, sanitation and education.

vi) UN Agencies – ILO: The ILO Should promote productive employment and decent work in the plantation sector by enhancing the knowledge base, building the capacity of constituents and providing technical advice with particular attention to extending social protection and improving the organization, working conditions and productivity of plantation workers.

5. Ensure fair price and incentive for smallholder farmers

i) Investment and incentive mechanisms (such as subsidy) should be directed towards small farmers rather than being heavily skewed towards big industrialists.

ii) Appropriate minimum support pricing should be declared by the state for green leaves. A procurement system is to be placed by the state so that farmers are provided with better price. Crop insurance system is to be introduced in tea farming to prevent farmers from climate-related and other shocks.

6. Ensure land rights to workers

i) Amidst the harsh reality that workers and their families are not provided with any land rights even after working for generations in the same tea plantation field, the state should ensure that land right is guaranteed to workers, which is an important step to uplift the workers from the ongoing exploitation.

ii) The state plantation areas in South Asia are increasingly being privatized and sold to private sector, MNCs and even being used to establish hotels in the name of tea tourism while workers are deprived of land rights. The state must end this discrepancy and allotment of public tea estate land to private sector and MNCs must be stopped.

List of appeal making organizations:

South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)

Bangladesh Nari Pragoti Sangha (BNPS), Bangladesh

National Tea Workers' Federation, Bangladesh

Dooars Terai Adivasi Women Welfare Society, India

Progressive Plantation Workers Union (PPWU), India

Working Peoples Charter, India

All Nepal Peasants' Federations (ANPFa), Nepal

Central Tea Cooperative Federation, Nepal

Federation of Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Nepal (FAPWUN), Nepal

Human Rights Alliance, Nepal

Tea Producers' Association, Nepal

Ceylon Workers' Congress, Sri Lanka

Movement for Plantation Peoples' Land Rights (MPPLR), Sri Lanka

National Fisheries Solidarity Organization (NAFSO)

Praja Abhilasha Network, Sri Lanka

Social Institute for Development of Plantation Sector (SIDPS), Sri Lanka

Up-Country Workers' Front, Sri Lanka

Up-Country Social Research Centre, Sri Lanka