

SUMMER STORY

By Gillian Southey, CWS communications coordinator.

31% of children born to estate workers are underweight. On the tea estates or plantations, mothers struggle to keep hunger at bay.

Credit: Randall Collis/Monlar



TIME FOR THE TEAPICKERS

There is something striking about Sri Lanka's tea pickers viewed from a distance. Their colourful clothing set against the lush green hills of a tea estate suggests happy workers engaged in timeless activity. Skilled hands deftly pick each bud with the two youngest leaves, before placing them quickly in a handwoven basket carried with ease. Handpicked the quality leaves will be dried and processed into the finest Ceylon tea. A drink I enjoy.

Looks are deceiving. Snakes and bloodthirsty leeches lie on the ground in wait for an unsuspecting worker. The pickers work fast and carefully to gather the 18 kilograms they need to meet their daily quota in between rain showers on sometimes steep slopes.

While the image may be beautiful, the life of the tea picker is hard. CWS partner the Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (Monlar) says tea pickers live and work in conditions close to slavery. Monlar wants to see an end to the injustice that condemns Estate workers to dangerous levels of poverty.

COLONIAL WORKFORCE

Most tea pickers are descendants of Tamil families brought from India to work on the coffee, rubber, coconut and tea plantations in the early nineteenth century. For more than a century, colonial estate owners profited from a cheap and compliant labour force that harvested the highest quality tea. When the government nationalised the industry in the 1970s, it sent 300,000 of these labourers back to India. Those remaining were only granted citizenship in 1978. Today almost 25% of estate workers do not have National Identity cards or birth and marriage certificates.

Estate workers are in the bottom tier of all socio-economic indicators except the rate of female employment. Women



At dusk women return from a long day's work picking tea. The minimum quota is 18 kg a day. Credit: Monlar

tend to pick the tea while men undertake the routine maintenance work to improve production. Many do not get enough to eat and their children are more likely to be hungry and miss school.

WINS FOR ESTATE WORKERS

Monlar has been working with the estate workers to improve wages and working conditions. Every improvement they win has an immediate effect for thousands of families employed in the sector.

Estate owners and the workers' unions negotiate a collective agreement in a process watched closely by government every two years. At first the goalposts seemed to be set very low, so Monlar linked with others including unions and religious leaders to form the Thousand Movement, demanding a daily basic salary of 1,000 Rupees or NZ\$8.15, double what they were



Two families often crowd into one small unit in a row of line houses on the estate. Cooking is done outside. Water is most likely to come from a shared tap or well. Credit: Monlar

receiving. The Thousand Movement organised pickets putting pressure on the three estate unions who were willing to accept a lot less - Rs 625 or NZ\$5.10 according to Chintaka Rajapakse, the Moderator of Monlar.

Agreement was reached at the end of January, boosting the daily base rate to Rs 750 or NZ \$6.12 a day, with a higher rate for each kilogram picked over the daily quota. The Sri Lankan government agreed to allocate Rs 150 million or NZ \$1.2 million to meet the payments. Tea contributes close to 20% of the country's export earnings.

"When the prices are low, the government gifts [estate companies] massive amounts of money as subsidies so

IN NUMBERS

There are **1,676** tea estates in Sri Lanka.

Close to one million people or **5.3%** of the population work in the tea industry.

In Sri Lanka, wages make up just **2.33%** of the cost of a packet of Dilmah tea.

83% of estate families live in run down line houses.

55% have access to clean water, mostly from a common tap or well.

23% have no toilets.

12% cannot read or write.



Monlar is supporting the tea pickers to demand better wages and living conditions as well as space to grow their own food.

they are always in the green, so to speak," said Chintaka at a press conference ahead of negotiations. Monlar is also leading a campaign to ensure land rights for estate workers.

URGENT NEED TO IMPROVE LIVING CONDITIONS

While some tea is grown by small farmers who sell it to a local company, many more live and work for an estate which is likely to control housing, education, medical services and credit at the village store. Estate workers own no land and are not allowed to grow food. Over 80% live in often dilapidated line houses, consisting of one or two rooms where two or three families squeeze into less than 20 square metres. There are few windows and sanitation is poor. One common tap or well provides water for the community. Cooking is done outside.

BREAK THE BONDS OF POVERTY

At its heart Monlar is committed to Sri Lanka's small farmers and to restoring the land. Estate workers are the most vulnerable sector in a country divided by ethnicity. Farmers themselves, Monlar knows the importance of getting government backing to end the hunger and poverty that supports their most famous product. Fair trade cannot bring the change needed fast enough.

Monlar needs your help to increase the momentum for fair wages and their work to bring peace to communities in this beautiful land. Please support the Summer Appeal so Monlar can do what it takes to improve their livelihoods.



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