



Annual Report 2020-2021

Incorporating a look back at 2018-19

www.THIRST.international

Registered Charity Number 1189499

THIRST (The International Roundtable for Sustainable Tea) champions human rights in the global tea industry.

100% independently funded, THIRST is a collaborative platform for all committed to revolutionising the tea industry.

It provides a space for civil society, tea workers and farmers to work together towards systemic change via collaboration, transparency, mutual understanding and respect. Its vision is a fair and sustainable tea industry which respects and empowers tea workers and farmers, and protects their rights and environment.

THIRST's goals align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and the International Labour Organisation Conventions.

It seeks decent work and living wages, gender equity, improved health, housing, safety and benefits, protected environments and fair, effective and transparent systems.

On 15th May 2020 THIRST became a registered charity, number 1189499.

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Why THIRST exists

The problems

Tea production is estimated to employ around 13 million people around the world. A growing number of these – around 9 million so far – are smallholder farmers, and the rest live and work on tea estates, also referred to as tea plantations or tea gardens.ⁱ Multiple reportsⁱⁱ have found that the human rights of many tea workers and small tea growers are being breached – with particular emphasis on wages, housing, healthcare and water & sanitation.

Women form the majority of workers in the lowest-paid plantation roles and, like their sisters all over the world, bear the burden of unpaid domestic work and often lack the capacity to speak out on their rights. The shortage of adequate health services on tea estates – along with poor nutrition – puts them at higher risk of maternal health related problems.ⁱⁱⁱ

Meanwhile, the growing numbers of small tea farmers – like small farmers everywhere – lack the bargaining power individually to ensure the best possible prices for their tea.

The reasons behind these problems are complex.

What lies behind the problems?

Much of the tea industry perpetuates a rigid 19th century system built on strict hierarchies in which tea estate workers are almost wholly reliant on their employers, particularly in India where the system was first established by British colonialists in the late 19th century, when tea production was highly profitable.

From the perspective of tea estate owners and managers – as well as many of their workers – this reliance is a benign form of patronage. They see themselves as caring for and looking after their workers despite increasingly difficult financial circumstances. They provide permanent workers and their families with housing, education, healthcare, subsidised food and more. Many on both sides see the relationship as paternal rather than feudal, and in many ways the lives of tea workers are more secure than other low-paid labourers. Owners point to the low rate of COVID-19 infections on tea plantations as evidence of this.

But other workers and their champions – including many trade unions, NGOs, academics and activists – see the relationship as one of exploitation amounting to forced labour. They contend this is because housing is reliant on working on the estate, cash wages are too low to afford escape and workers often end up in debt. They say that when the legally mandated benefits are provided (and often they are not), they are of very poor quality. As a result, in some regions, health (and other social) indicators for tea workers are worse than for the population in general or for other agricultural labourers^{iv}.

Tea has gone from being a relatively rare, high value delicacy traded within the framework of a powerful economic and political empire, to a cheap and over-plentiful commodity traded between a few large and powerful companies and hundreds of smaller producers. Almost every report on tea begins with the statement that tea is the second most popular drink in the world, after water. It is a ubiquitous, yet deeply undervalued staple in most of the world's kitchens and cafés. And with the undervaluing of the product, comes the under-payment of the majority of workers who produce it.

Yet the global popularity of tea persists, generating sufficient profits for some companies to thrive. In common with many – if not most – agricultural commodities, profits are concentrated at the branding and retail end of the value chain.

Goodies and baddies? Or constructive dialogue?

It would be easy to respond to this complex picture by focusing on the negative, pointing fingers and laying blame – identifying goodies and baddies – but that is unlikely to lead to constructive solutions. Indeed it has failed to do so, so far.

THIRST was established to provide a platform for civil society to bring together its knowledge, experience and voices to challenge and support the industry to change. One of the six principles that civil society organisations set for THIRST is that “In pursuing our primary goal of improving the lives of tea workers, tea farmers and their families, [we] recognise that each stakeholder in the tea sector is part of a complex, interdependent economic and social ecosystem and act accordingly.”

Many worthy attempts to improve the lives of tea workers and farmers in specific ways have been and continue to be made. These efforts date back to the birth of the industry, but unilateral efforts can only ever have a limited impact because of this complex set of global interdependencies. To THIRST's knowledge, no studies so far have analysed the drivers of human rights breaches across the sector as a whole.

A brave new era for the tea sector

THIRST believes that the best way to address the systemic issues driving human rights breaches in the tea sector is to analyse the sector itself – the whole sector, not just parts of it – to help build mutual understanding between its stakeholders of the factors that are driving those breaches, to seek out and share good practice and innovative solutions, and to foster constructive dialogue that can lead to positive action.

Tea's ecosystem needs a social, political and economic reset. And this will require global action on multiple levels, giving birth to a fair and sustainable tea industry where workers and farmers are empowered and their rights are protected. THIRST aims to be a midwife to that process.

Since THIRST's establishment in 2018 we have been laying the foundations to do that.

THIRST'S INCEPTION YEARS 2018-2020

On the morning of 19th June 2018, close to the venue in which the Ethical Tea Partnership's biennial TeamUp meeting would be held later that day, the inaugural meeting of THIRST took place. The meeting was attended by representatives of Accountability Counsel, Care International, Ethical Trading Initiative (NGO Caucus), Fairtrade International, Fairtrade Foundation, Forum for the Future, Living Wage Foundation, Oxfam GB, Oxfam India, Oxfam Malawi, The Plantation and Allied Workers Union of Malawi, Traidcraft and Unicef UK.

This was a consultative meeting to help decide how THIRST would work. While initially conceived as, potentially, a membership organisation, we did not at that stage finalise its structure but agreed the broad [Principles of THIRST](#) as an informal network of organisations concerned about the living and working conditions of tea workers and farmers.

After the meeting, a small group of us attended the Team-Up conference, where it was recommended that "the most effective ways to achieve transformational sector-wide change" would be for tea packers, producers and traders to come together in closer collaboration, to work with governments and to collaborate with NGOs through platforms like THIRST.

In the subsequent months, THIRST focused on recruiting a Board of Trustees, developing a [website](#) that incorporates a [Knowledge Hub](#) of key resources for civil society and companies seeking to improve tea workers' and farmers' lives, broadening and deepening our networks and knowledge. We also established our brand with a fresh and distinctive logo that subtly highlights the people behind the tea leaf.

In January 2019, THIRST CEO, Sabita Banerji, travelled to some of India's major tea growing areas, meeting with tea pluckers, health workers, trade unionists, NGOs, managers, owners and others. This provided a balanced view of both the problems experienced by tea estate workers and the challenges faced by their employers in addressing them, as described in the blog, [THIRST for Perspective](#).

In the subsequent months, THIRST continued to develop its global connections, raise awareness about tea workers' and farmers' rights and conditions through talks and lectures and provide feedback and advice to other organisations working on similar issues. For example, Richard and Martha Anker of the Global Living Wage Coalition reached out to THIRST for advice on tea wages in India to inform their upcoming living wage benchmark for the Nilgiris; the Ethical Trading Initiative NGO Caucus invited THIRST to facilitate a group looking at living wages in Assam; THIRST participated in the civil society consultation meeting on Fairtrade tea hired labour standards; the law firm, Leigh Day, informed THIRST about the case against Unilever for failing to protect its Kenyan employees against political violence in 2007, and THIRST provided Leigh Day with information on tea trading mechanisms to help inform its other cases in the sector.

Sabita worked with Oxfam GB's Private Sector Team to co-author the report [Addressing the Human Cost of Assam Tea](#) which sought to analyse the root causes of breaches of human rights by looking at the whole value chain and recommend actions by stakeholders at all levels. The report was a case study for Oxfam's Behind the Barcodes campaign, which urges major supermarkets in several countries to improve the human rights policies for their agricultural supply chains.

THIRST's CEO and Trustees also spent much of 2019 working on our application to become a registered charity in the UK. With the invaluable pro bono support of Kirkland Ellis LLP, we finally achieved this on May 15th 2020.

ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS APRIL 2020 - MARCH 2021

Inspiring dialogue

In June 2020, THIRST convened its first international roundtable meeting, 'Building Tea Back Better'. Explaining the UN concept of "Building Back Better" and how/why this applies to tea, the event was attended by almost 100 participants from around the world and from many different parts of the tea value chain including corporates such as major supermarkets, NGOs, Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives, standards bodies, universities and law firms. It demonstrated healthy demand for this events that enable dialogue between tea stakeholders.

This was followed by a series of follow-up discussions on some of the key issues raised at the roundtable meeting. These were:

- **Making Social Dialogue Work for Women Tea Workers in Africa** – with the support of Bananalink, we invited women trade union leaders from Latin America to share their experience of with civil society actors in the Malawi tea sector. Oxfam's Juliet Suliwa spoke about the work of the Malawi 2020 Tea Revitalisation Programme with Malawi's Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (PAWU) to address multiple challenges faced by women in the tea sector, and trade leaders, Iris Munguia and Adela Torres, told us how they used the findings of a ground breaking study identifying problems for women working in the banana sector to push for improvements.
- **Simplifying the value chain and distributing value more fairly** - Kathrin Gassert of the innovative German tea retailer, Teekampagne and Will Battle, tea procurement advisor to IDH, expanded on their business models. Erinch Sahan, Chief Executive of World Fair Trade Organisation and an expert in alternative enterprise models reflected on the presentations, and a rich discussion was facilitated by Oxfam's Workers' Rights Senior Manager, Rachel Wilshaw. The discussion blossomed out into a fascinating discourse on transformative business models, innovative financial approaches and the very fundamental question of how we as a global community value food.
- **Are cooperatives better for human rights?** In February 2021 Dr Miriam Wenner and Bebika Khawas shared the findings of their research on the different outcomes in two Darjeeling cooperatives, and we had input from THIRST Trustee, Michael Pennant-Jones, on his experience of tea cooperatives in Kenya.
- **Can speciality tea be a force for good/change?** In March we heard from two UK-based specialist tea companies, Postcard Teas and Comins Tea who shared their experience and philosophy to explore the question, can specialist tea be a force for good, a force for change in the wider tea sector?

Forging new linkages

Each TEA Talk has prompted new linkages between players in different parts of the tea value chain and across countries and continents for mutual learning and benefit. For example, the June 2020 roundtable prompted introductions between the German direct tea trader Teekampagne and the Canadian Tea Association; labour rights organisation, Bananalink, and Darjeeling tea producer Ambootia; and Darjeeling tea cooperative Mineral Springs and Kenyan Fintea Growers' cooperative. The TEA Talks have led to a number of tea company start-ups contacting the speakers on speciality tea about potential sources of sustainable and ethically sourced tea, and have prompted introductions between organisations such as the Ethical Trading Initiative and Oxfam in Malawi to explore the challenges COVID-19 has placed on women workers.

This year, THIRST also brought together a diverse global group of legal organisations to discuss legal approaches to protecting tea workers' rights. They are: The UK law firm Leigh Day (who are suing Unilever and Camellia over neglect/mistreatment of tea workers in Kenya and Malawi respectively); Nazdeek (who train paralegals, and campaign on legal right to living wages, maternal healthcare etc. in India); The Human Trafficking Legal Center (who work with the US Tariff Act according to which goods deemed to be produced by forced labour can be blocked from entering the US with a WRO (Withhold Release Order); and Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (who provide a platform for civil society to challenge companies on human rights abuses, and for companies to respond).

THIRST has also been developing its own valuable strategic relationships with other organisations like the Ethical Tea Partnership (a grouping of tea brands and retailers); the Global Tea Coalition (a coalition of tea brands and producers convened by IDH); the Tea and Herbal Association of Canada; the UK Tea and Infusions Association; Birkbeck University; Tata Institute of Social Science, Assam (India); the Global Living Wage Coalition and the IUF (the food, farm and hotel workers' global trade union federation). We are also developing dialogue with tea brands and producers around the world.

These new conversations are helping to build a more cohesive global picture of the tea industry and encourages cross-regional and cross-discipline learning – each one taking us a step closer to decent lives for tea workers and farmers.

Sharing knowledge

...through convening

THIRST has continued to convene the group of NGO Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI) members – originally concerned about living wages in Assam. It has met regularly to share information on activities in Assam and beyond and discuss the possibility of joint advocacy. The group includes Care International, Dalit Solidarity Network, the Fairtrade Foundation, Oxfam, Save the Children, UNICEF UK, and Women Working Worldwide.

In 2021, the group expanded its remit to include the wider tea industry on the basis that the issues facing tea workers in Assam are shared by tea workers in many other parts of India and the world and that their causes are systemic in nature and therefore need to be tackled at a sector-wide level.

The purpose of the group is to share knowledge and information to ensure consistency and avoid unnecessary duplication in their work. For example, the THIRST-facilitated meetings helped two members of the group to realise they were both developing grievance mechanisms in tea plantations of the same region and could then discuss how to ensure consistency and share learning.

...through publications

THIRST has brought together in its [Knowledge Hub](#) a collection of important reports on the human rights and environment of tea workers and farmers around the world to give civil society, industry and government easy access to the wealth of information that is available on these issues. Project Didi, for example, made full use of these resources when researching evidence for its submission on tea as a product of forced labour. THIRST continues to curate the collection and to keep it up to date.

In addition, THIRST identifies gaps in the information and seeks to fill them either with its own publications or by alerting others to the gaps.

These are THIRST's publications to date:

- **'Human Rights in Assam Tea Estates – The Long View'** – a literature review of 15 years of reports on the egregious working and living conditions that have been reported since the

inception of the industry in India – highlighting the four areas that are most often cited as highly problematic: wages, housing, water & sanitation and healthcare.

- **THIRST Briefing: Initial impact of Covid-19 on tea workers** - Notes on the impact that the lockdowns and economic slow-down had on tea workers in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic including loss of the valuable ‘first flush’ crop, loss of markets, travel and transport restrictions etc. This Briefing will be updated from time to time to reflect ongoing developments.
- **THIRST Briefing: East and South East Asia** - A literature review of reports on issues for tea workers and farmers in East and South East Asia highlighting the dearth of material on this topic and a gap that needs to be filled by further research.
- **THIRST Briefing: Pempila Orumai** – 2015 women workers’ uprising in Munnar In 2015 in Munnar, in the South Indian state of Kerala, several thousand women tea pluckers struck for 9 days, calling for a 20% bonus to be reinstated, a wage rise and improvements in their benefits and conditions. They disassociated themselves from trade unions, claiming they were not representing them effectively. They won on the bonus issue and a slight wage increase, but the struggle for better conditions and for full recognition of the movement – now an established trade union – is ongoing.

...through sharing news

THIRST has been publishing a (more-or-less) monthly [News Update](#) bringing together media reports on issues affecting the human rights and environment of tea workers and farmers worldwide. The mailing list for the update is growing continually and currently stands at over 130 subscribers.

THIRST continues to be active on social media, writing regular [blogs](#) and posting on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

...through talks

THIRST CEO, Sabita Banerji, has delivered talks and lectures to a wide range of audiences, raising awareness of the plight of tea workers and farmers around the world and the complex causes underlying these problems – but also offering suggestions for what can be done to address them.

THIRST delivered talks for Sunningwell WI and South Oxford WI, was a panellist on Fairtrade Yorkshire’s AGM event, and delivered lectures for two of Oxford Brookes Business School modules; Business in Society and International Business Management. In previous years THIRST has spoken at the University of Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum.

These talks generated a small amount of income for THIRST.

Joining up voices

THIRST seeks to convene civil society voices for joined up advocacy when needed. For example, when 400,000 Assam tea workers went on strike in September 2020, calling for Rs 350 a day, the ETI NGOs agreed a position statement - drafted by THIRST – urging British tea companies to support them. The ETI published a THIRST [blog outlining the position statement](#) on 16th Oct. Other NGOs used the message in their dialogue with companies and through their own social media channels – such as this post by [Oxfam on LinkedIn](#).

Consulting and advising

THIRST has been called upon to provide inputs into a number of important initiatives including:

- **Fairtrade International Hired Labour Standards** – THIRST was invited to take part in the civil society consultation on the revised standards. THIRST called (among other things) for the

standards to be more ambitious on wages, using living wages as the benchmark instead of international poverty lines.

- **Be Slavery Free and Project Didi** – THIRST provided input into a draft submission by the two organisations to the US Department of Labor calling for Indian tea to be listed as a product of forced labor. If accepted this could result in advocacy and support from the US Government to the Indian government and tea industry to tackle forced labour issues.
- **Ethical Tea Partnership Strategic Review** – THIRST advocated (among other things) for greater transparency of the share of value along the supply chain and for tea brands and retailers to take greater responsibility for human rights in their supply chains.
- **Leigh Day Lawyers** – THIRST provided insights into the tea sector as a whole (NB Following pressure from Leigh Day the tea company Camellia has conceded to calls for compensation and mitigation measures for women in Malawi who had brought cases of sexual harassment).
- **Human Trafficking Legal Centre**, New York – THIRST was invited to comment on whether to call for Indian tea to be subject to a Withhold Release Order by US Customs under forced labour regulations THIRST advised against as this would only further commercially damage an already struggling industry.

Joining forces

In 2021 THIRST was accepted as a member of the [Ethical Trading Initiative](#), a leading alliance of companies, trade unions and NGOs that promotes respect for workers' rights around the globe. ETI's vision is a world where all workers are free from exploitation and discrimination, and enjoy conditions of freedom, security and equity.

THIRST is also a partner of [Advocates for International Development](#). A4ID brokers free legal support for us as a development partner by matching our needs with the capability of its legal partners, who have a wide range of expertise, from microfinance work and dispute resolution to work involving environmental law.

LOOKING FORWARD

Over the next three years THIRST plans to consolidate and build on the knowledge and networks it has developed so far by conducting a human rights impact assessment (HRIA) of the global tea sector.

This will be a community-based HRIA in partnership with other expert civil society organisations. It is intended to provide a strong evidence base for future advocacy and action by civil society, companies and governments to reduce the risk of human rights breaches and ensure that remedy is always provided where such breaches occur.

Many civil society organisations and companies have sought to address certain aspects of well-reported human rights breaches in various parts of the tea sector, but none – as far as we know - has looked at the root causes in the sector as a whole, taking into consideration the global nature of the tea industry and the interdependence of its various parts.

This study will not only look broadly across the geographical spread of tea producing and buying countries, but will also take an analytical look along the length of the tea value chain.

The HRIA will use a strong gender lens; women form the majority of workers in the lowest-paid roles, and in addition bear the burden of unpaid domestic work. They are often not empowered to speak out on their rights. And because tea plantation workers are highly dependent on their employers for a range of benefits, they receive very low cash wages and are often located in

physically isolated areas, we will assess their situation against the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Forced Labour Indicators.

And we will, of course, continue with our monthly updates and TEA Talks, will keep updating our Knowledge Hub and – wherever possible – contribute to the evolution of the tea industry into a fair and sustainable 21st century industry.

THIRST BOARD OF TRUSTEES AND STAFF

Trustees

Debbie Coulter - Treasurer

An active trade unionist for over 30 years, Debbie was elected Deputy General Secretary of the GMB Trade Union in 2003. She served as an ACAS Council Member and on the Women & Work Commission into Equal Pay and the Commission for Vulnerable Employment. She was Ethical Trading Initiative's Head of Programmes and now works voluntarily for many charitable organisations.

Krishanti Dharmaraj

Krishanti is the Executive Director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership in New York and co-founder of WILD for Human Rights (Women's Institute for Leadership Development) and the Sri Lanka Children's Fund. Formerly, she was a spokesperson for Amnesty International USA.

Michael Pennant-Jones

Michael is currently Head of Technical & Capability at Impactt Ltd. He was formerly Group Head of Sustainability of James Finlay Ltd, a member of the Tea Advisory Group for Utz Cert. and Swire Sustainability Committee. Prior to Finlays he worked for Premier Brands Typhoo.

Nikhil Subbiah - Chair

Nikhil is an investment funds lawyer at a leading global law firm, with experience working with impact investments, development finance institutions and in emerging markets. He was previously a Churchill Memorial Trust Fellow and conducted a research trip to tea plantations in India and Sri Lanka.

Stirling Smith

Stirling is an independent ethical trade consultant and former Chief Technical Adviser for the International Labour Organisation in India. He has worked for DFID, British Council, Fair Labour Association, trade unions, NGOs and several companies.

Founder and CEO

Sabita Banerji

An economic justice advisor who was born and raised on tea plantations in Kerala and Assam, Sabita has nearly 20 years' experience working in ethical trade and international development having held strategic posts at Oxfam and the Ethical Trading Initiative. She was previously a member of the Board of Directors of Just Change, UK – a voluntary community tea trading initiative.

Designer

Maia Bergh

HRIA Fundraiser

Philippa Bird

ACCOUNTS

In these first few years, we have focused on getting THIRST established and building up our networks and knowledge. Apart from an early generous grant from Fairtrade Germany that made the 2019 trip to India possible, and donations from kind individuals, we have had no funding for our running costs. As the founder of THIRST, it has been a labour of love to help get us to this point – but it would not have been possible without the many generous people who have donated their time, skill and money to THIRST. We have costed out this donated time and included it in our accounts to demonstrate the value that has been invested in THIRST. This is our foundation as we start the next phase of our journey – raising funds for the human rights impact assessment and for THIRST’s work going forward. Since this is our first Annual Report, we have included accounts for THIRST’s first two years as well.

INCOME	2020-21
Donations	£ 294.58
Speakers fees	£ 110.00
Grants	-
<i>In-kind</i>	<i>£60,133.42</i>
TOTAL	£ 60,538.00

EXPENDITURE	
IT	£ 677.11
Design & Print	£ 2,000.00
Travel	-
Legal fees	-
Events	-
TOTAL	£ 2,677.11

Cash balance -£2,272.53

INCOME	2018-19	2019-20
Donations	-	£ 200.00
Speakers fees	£ 135.78	£ 200.00
Grants	£ 4,035.90	-
<i>In-kind</i>	<i>£ 15,000.00</i>	<i>£ 28,500.00</i>
TOTAL	£ 19,171.68	£ 28,900.00

EXPENDITURE		
IT	£ 624.25	£ 631.03
Design & Print	£ 2,314.80	£ 300.00
Travel	£ 1,712.15	£ 65.25
Legal fees	£ 474.00	-
Events	£ 104.40	-
TOTAL	£ 5,229.60	£ 996.28

Cash balance -£ 1,057.92 -£596.28

Thanks and acknowledgements

THIRST could not have come into existence or come as far as it has today without the help and support of many people. We would like to offer our heartfelt thanks to the following people in particular for their voluntary work, advice and moral support – but also to all who have provided encouragement, support, advice, donations, subscribed to THIRST updates and participated in our TEA Talks.

Caroline Sloan
Madeline Linnel

Maia Bergh
Peter Williams

Philippa Bird
Rachel Wilshaw

Sloane Hamilton
Wilbert Flinterman

Also warm thanks to Matthew Merkle and Elio Gaarhuis of Kirkland Ellis LLP for getting THIRST over the finish line as a registered charity.

ⁱ Global Market Report: Tea Sustainable Commodities Marketplace International Institute for Sustainable Development Series 2019. <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/publications/ssi-global-market-report-tea.pdf>

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Human Rights in Assam Tea Estates – The Long View. THIRST 2020.

<https://thirst.international/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-long-view-THIRST-Feb-2020.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, A matter of life and death: Surviving Childbirth on Assam’s Tea Plantations. Nazdeek. 2018

<https://indd.adobe.com/view/aaf00c7a-8407-4ea0-982c-ca8b3555168a>

^{iv} See, for example, Rajbangshi, P.R., Nambiar, D. “Who will stand up for us?” the social determinants of health of women tea plantation workers in India. Int J Equity Health 19, 29 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-020-1147-3>