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Assessment of the realization of the fundamental right to a safe and healthy working environment in the coconut sector in Sri Lanka

Analytical summary



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► Preface

The plantation sector plays an important role in the Sri Lankan economy and in driving socio-economic growth in the country. The country is a major exporter of plantation crops such as tea, coconut and rubber, and the sector is the country's single biggest employer, despite a decline in numbers of workers in recent years.

Despite the importance of plantations, and their potential role in economic growth and the creation of decent jobs, the sector faces challenges such as poor safety and health at work and working conditions, lack of information and awareness on fundamental rights issues, low levels of productivity and skills, and inadequate access to public services, amongst other issues. Workers in plantations face greater risks of occupational injuries and diseases than other workers, including in relation to unguarded machinery, exposure to dust in factories, and exposure to fertilizers, pesticides, and other agrochemicals. Accidents can occur due to work on difficult and uneven terrains, often under challenging weather conditions. Additionally, workers suffer injuries from insect, snake and leech bites and cuts from tools.

In response to these challenges, the ILO implemented the Safety + Health for all plantation workers in South Asia: Sri Lanka component project, under the ILO's global Safety + Health for All flagship programme, funded by the Government of Japan. The Sri Lanka component was linked to the wider project, which simultaneously addressed the conditions of workers in plantations in India and Nepal.¹ In order to help create a safe and healthy working environment in the sector, the project focuses on three core objectives:

- i. generate and share knowledge on constraints and opportunities to improve the safety and health of workers and prevent discrimination in the plantation sector in South Asia;
- ii. strengthen national and local institutions to better promote and protect the safety and health of plantation workers in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka; and
- iii. develop or strengthen workplace and industry level practices and initiatives to promote the safety and health of workers, in the plantation sector in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

In response to the first of these objectives, the project worked in collaboration with a research team of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to develop a diagnostic assessment of the realization of the fundamental right to a safe and healthy working environment. Recognizing that Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work are interrelated, inseparable and mutually reinforcing, the research also collected data on the realization of freedom of association, the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

The objective of the assessments was to build a solid knowledge base and develop effective strategies to improve the effective realization of the right to a safe and healthy working environment in the sector. The objectives and methodologies of the coconut sector assessment, which used a combination of in-depth interviews (IDI), Key Informant Interviews (KII), Focused Group Discussions (FGD) and observations, as per the ILO research manual Assessment of the implementation of fundamental principles and rights at work in the workplace (ILO, 2023), are detailed in the analytical summary below.²

¹ See ILO, [Safety + health for all plantation workers in South Asia: project details](#), 2021.

² ILO, [Research Manual - Assessment of the implementation of fundamental principles and rights at work in the workplace](#), 2023.

The purpose of this analytical summary is to frame and contextualize the findings of the diagnostic report on the right to a safe and healthy working environment, alongside its relationship with collective bargaining and discrimination, in the coconut sector in Sri Lanka and to formulate actionable recommendations based on these findings. It is paired with two separate reports that provide analytical summaries of the situations relating to safety and health in the tea and rubber sectors. The findings of the report and the recommendations drawn for the coconut sector will be shared with national stakeholders.

As of 2024, Sri Lanka has been working towards the development and adoption of new labour legislation, including a specific chapter on occupational safety and health, that would hopefully close gaps regarding applicable legislation in the country. It is hoped that the findings of this report will help inform these developments, while providing practical guidance to the government, employers and workers on measures to improve working conditions and advance decent work in the coconut sector.

Joni Simpson,
Director,
ILO Country Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives

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► List of abbreviations

CCB	Coconut Cultivation Board
CDA	Coconut Development Authority
CRISL	Coconut Research Institute of Sri Lanka
CWC	Ceylon Workers' Congress
DWCP	Decent Work Country Programme
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FPRW	Fundamental principles and rights at work
IDI	In Depth Interview
ILO	International Labour Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview
LJEWU	Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIOSH	National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health
NIPM	National Institute of Plantation Management
OSH	Occupational safety and health
PHDT	Plantation Human Development Trust
PPE	Personal protective equipment

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► List of abbreviations

CCB	Coconut Cultivation Board
CDA	Coconut Development Authority
CRISL	Coconut Research Institute of Sri Lanka
CWC	Ceylon Workers' Congress
DWCP	Decent Work Country Programme
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FPRW	Fundamental principles and rights at work
IDI	In Depth Interview
ILO	International Labour Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview
LJEWU	Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIOSH	National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health
NIPM	National Institute of Plantation Management
OSH	Occupational safety and health
PHDT	Plantation Human Development Trust
PPE	Personal protective equipment

1. Background and context

1.1. The coconut sector in Sri Lanka

Coconuts and coconut trees are found throughout Sri Lanka and are intertwined with the country's history and culture. Coconuts are a key part of Sri Lankan life, from everyday food and drink, to delicacies, farm tools, household products, fuel and even roofing materials and furniture, they are an important source of livelihoods and resources. There is a recorded history of the use of coconuts that dates back over two thousand years and the word 'coconut' itself originates from Spanish and Portuguese explorers visiting coconut plantations along the Sri Lankan coast during the early 16th century.³

Coconuts and coconut products have been an export industry for Sri Lanka since the 1850s.⁴ Today, coconuts play a vital role in the Sri Lankan economy, with the country being the fourth-largest exporter of coconuts and coconut-based products in the world. They represent around 12 per cent of the country's agricultural production, with around 2,500 to 3,000 million coconuts produced annually. The coconut sector and plantations provide livelihoods to around 700,000 and indirect employment to another 135,000 workers. Meanwhile, coconuts are a staple of Sri Lankan food, providing fat, proteins, fibre, vitamins and minerals to millions of people.⁵

Workers in Sri Lanka's coconut sector face significant hazards and risks associated with their work tasks, many in common with those faced in other agriculture and plantation sectors. Coconut plucking is one of the most dangerous jobs associated with coconut cultivation, often carried out either by climbing trees or with long bamboo poles, both of which carry a high risk of accident, injury and fatality. Workers are continuously exposed to the risk of falling coconuts, which can cause serious injury to the head and body. In coconut processing factories, often unguarded machinery, especially in coir production, presents additional hazards and risks, with workers frequently handling sharp tools, which can cause cuts and other hand injuries. Dust exposure in coir factories and the lack of proper ventilation also contribute to the risk of respiratory problems for workers.

While the majority of landowners in Sri Lanka are men, a large proportion of the coconut sector's workforce are women. Country-wide persistent gender issues such as wage gaps and employment gaps, as well as prevailing inequalities between ethnic groups, mean that the coconut sector is at risk of discrimination in terms of employment and occupation. Furthermore, there is also evidence that the sector is characterized by limited freedom of association, social dialogue and collective bargaining, with workers tending to not be formally organized into trade unions or workers' organizations. This is in large part due to the high number of smallholders working in the sector, who are less likely to be organized than those working on large plantations, across the plantations sector.

Despite concerns over the realization of occupational safety and health (OSH) and interrelated fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW) in Sri Lanka's coconut sector, more research is needed in order to better understand the safety and health challenges faced by the sector. The ILO *Safety + Health for all plantation*

³ Sri Lanka Export Development Board, [Coconut based products from Sri Lanka](#), no date, accessed 1 October 2024.

⁴ Dr. P.G.Punchihewa, 'Sri Lanka's coconut industry: glorious past, dismal present, uncertain future', in The Sunday Times, Sri Lanka, July 19 2015

⁵ Sri Lanka Export Development Board, [Coconut based products from Sri Lanka](#), no date, accessed 1 October 2024.

workers in South Asia project therefore conducted this assessment of the realization of OSH and interrelated FPRW in the coconut sector to build a knowledge base that could help develop practicable recommendations to promote decent work in the sector. As a key strategic sector for Sri Lanka, it is hoped that these can foster sustainable sectoral growth in the country, as it looks to recover from its recent economic and political crisis and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2. Fundamental principles and rights at work in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, like all ILO Member States, is obligated to promote and realize the principles concerning FPRW. As of a decision at the 110th Session of the International Labour Conference in June 2022, the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work includes the right to a safe and healthy working environment.

ILO Member States are obligated and committed to:

- ▶ freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- ▶ the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- ▶ the effective abolition of child labour;
- ▶ the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation; and
- ▶ a safe and healthy working environment.

To date, Sri Lanka has ratified 43 ILO Conventions, including eight of the ILO fundamental conventions, demonstrating a commitment to these principles in national law and practice. These include: the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29); the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87); the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98); the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105); the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111); the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138); and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). Notably in the context of this report, Sri Lanka has not ratified the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155) nor the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187). Nevertheless, all ILO Member States have the obligation to respect, promote and realize all FPRW, including on safety and health at work.

The two most recent reviews of the ILO Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP) for Sri Lanka highlight persistent issues with OSH and other FPRW in Sri Lanka. The review of the 2013 to 2017 DWCP assessed that substantial progress had been made in the area of child labour, rural economic development, ratification of international labour standards and building capacity of the Employers' Federation of Ceylon and workers' organisations. Some of the major milestones included the launch of the National Occupational Safety and Health Policy, Child Labour policy and Policy on Zero Tolerance for Hazardous forms of Child Labour. At the same time, the internal review revealed that greater consolidated effort was

needed in other areas of work, such as mainstreaming gender, labour market governance, social dialogue and social protection. The 2017 to 2022 DWCP review highlighted that only around 30 per cent of the workforce in Sri Lanka is covered by OSH legislation. At the same time, a lack of freedom of association and right to organise, discrimination in the workplace, a lack of sufficient protection against forced labour and worst forms of child labour, a lack of a legal framework to cover workers engaged in contract labour, and a need for bipartite and tripartite social dialogue and evidence based wage setting mechanisms were among the key issues that had been highlighted by constituents and by ILO supervisory bodies.⁶

1.3. Relevant labour laws and policies relating to working conditions and safety and health at work

Labour law in Sri Lanka is undergoing a period of significant transformation. As of 2024, Sri Lanka is currently considering revising, updating and modernizing its labour laws, in a process that has been disrupted by political crisis. One proposal has been for a unified Employment Act, that would bring together the provisions contained in several different pieces of national legislation and revise them in light of the specific challenges the country faces as it emerges from a period affected by economic and political crises, as well as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While awaiting these potential revisions, existing labour laws remain in place, though are relatively weak and inadequately enforced. Current labour law provides for the following:

- ▶ **A minimum wage** of Rs. 17,500, since March 2024;⁷
- ▶ **Working hours** of a maximum of eight hours daily and 45 hours per working week;
- ▶ **Hours of rest** including one hour per working day of eight hours or more, and one and a half working days per week;
- ▶ **Overtime payment:** if a worker works beyond their contracted working hours, they are entitled to overtime pay at the rate of one and a half times their regular pay, up to a maximum of 12 working hours;
- ▶ **Leave:** including annual leave of 14 days of annual leave after one year of service, and seven days of casual leave per year, as well as public holidays
- ▶ **Maternity leave:** including for 12 weeks (84 days) of fully paid maternity leave;
- ▶ **A minimum retirement age:** of 60 years old.⁸

Regarding safety and health at work, in 2014, the Government of Sri Lanka adopted a national OSH policy, which applies to all economic sectors and all forms of work.⁹ The national policy provisions provide strategic orientations to:

6 ILO, [Decent work country programme: Sri Lanka 2018-2022](#), 2018.

7 NewsFirst, [Sri Lanka Increases National Minimum Wage](#), in NewsFirst, 26 March 2024.

8 Bipo Times, [Sri Lanka labour law and employment regulations](#), 2022.

9 See Ministry of Labour and Labour Relations of Sri Lanka, [The national occupational safety and health policy](#), 2014.

- ▶ ***Review the legislative, institutional and regulatory framework:*** including the main legislative instrument on OSH, the Factory Ordinance, No 45 of 1942, covering mainly factories;
- ▶ ***Provide compensation for workers*** in case of work-related injury or disease;
- ▶ ***Deliver education training and awareness*** to employers, workers and other stakeholders;
- ▶ ***Support the Small and medium-sized enterprises*** (SMEs) and informal sectors;
- ▶ ***Provide financial support and investment for OSH programmes and management;***
- ▶ ***Develop systems for recording, analysing, storing,*** disseminating and utilizing accurate and reliable OSH data;
- ▶ ***Address gender biases*** regarding OSH in the world of work;
- ▶ ***Promote an OSH culture*** and work-related safety and health;
- ▶ ***Promote an integrated OSH system.***

The existing OSH policy makes specific reference to the agriculture sector, highlighting the challenges of the high incidence of informal work in the sector, low productivity, and OSH challenges such as poor working and living conditions, high incidence of occupational accidents, fatalities and diseases, exposure to agrochemicals, a lack of occupational health services, underreporting of injuries and diseases, and a lack of OSH knowledge among employers, workers and other stakeholders.

As of 2024, the Government has drafted a new national OSH policy, together with a National OSH Programme for the period 2024 to 2028. These policy documents still needed endorsement by the newly elected Government at the time of drafting this report, but they aim to strengthen OSH regulations and address issues that have persisted since the adoption of the 2014 policy.

2. Objectives

The objective of the study was to assess the realization of the right to a safe and healthy working environment in the coconut sector in Sri Lanka. It also looked at interlinkages with the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation and freedom of association the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. Assessment of FPRW for the elimination of child labour and abolition of forced labour were considered outside of the coverage of the assessment, as they require specific focus and expertise that extend beyond the scope of this study.

The assessment reviewed the legal framework applicable in the sector and conducted direct observations, interviews and group discussions in coconut plantations, in order to identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the application of OSH and its interlinkages with the other FPRW. Regarding types of plantations, the assessment examined the situation in both large plantations and smallholders separately, with both types of enterprise varying significantly, as large plantations typically have more formalized operations, while smallholders tend to be family run and informal.

This analytical summary reviews and analyses the findings of the assessment of the coconut sector, to bring to light the key observations that the report has made on the application of OSH and interrelated FPRW and provide actionable recommendations to constituents to promote a safe and healthy working environment in the sector.



3. Methodology

3.1. Design of tools and data collection methods

The methodology for the diagnostic assessment of the realization of OSH and interrelated FPRW in the coconut sector in Sri Lanka was based upon the guidance included in a draft of the ILO Research Manual Assessment of the implementation of fundamental principles and rights at work in the workplace. The Research Manual contains practicable steps on assessing FPRW situations at the workplace, identifying and analysing constraints in their application, establishing the concerns and needs of tripartite constituents and other stakeholders in the sector, and identifying opportunities and approaches to improve their realization. It also contains primary research tools, including tools and handbooks for delivering questionnaires, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.¹⁰

The assessment on the realization of OSH and interrelated FRPW standards in Sri Lanka's coconut sector utilized a mixed-method approach, focusing on both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The study consisted of two components:

- i. A descriptive cross-sectional survey that assessed the OSH standards in coconut fields and factories. Data was collected using a structured, interviewer-administered questionnaire, or in-depth interviews (IDIs).
- ii. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with employers and workers separately to gather qualitative data. Stakeholder or key informant interviews (KIIs) were held with relevant OSH authorities and coconut sector representatives. In addition, NIOSH experts conducted field observations to document OSH issues.

The data collection methods included:

- ▶ desk study;
- ▶ in-depth interviews (IDIs);
- ▶ key informant interviews (KIIs);
- ▶ focused group discussions (FGDs); and

3.2. Assessment process

Of the coconut producing districts in Sri Lanka, Puttalam and Kurunegala were selected based on guidance from the Ministry of Plantations due to their high density of coconut plantations. The Ministry selected a list of 48 plantations, covering both large plantations and smallholders, including 22 plantations from Kurunegala and 26 from Puttalam. Probability proportionate to size sampling was then used to select a representative sample of plantations for the study. This

¹⁰ ILO, [Research Manual - Assessment of the implementation of fundamental principles and rights at work in the workplace](#), 2023.

resulted in the final selection of 30 plantations: 10 large plantations from each district and 10 small plantations in total. From each plantation, two managers and 20 workers were randomly selected for interviews. FGDs were then organized separately with both employers and workers.

► **Figure 1:** Districts covered by the assessment



The primary method for collecting data was the interviewer-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire included various sections on personal identification, employment conditions, occupational accidents, health issues, and equality, to be directed towards employers, workers, and other stakeholders. The survey questionnaire was originally drafted in English, before being translated into Sinhala and Tamil using a forward-backward translation methodology. This was done with care to ensure the cultural relevance and accuracy of the translation. Pre-testing of the translated questionnaire was conducted in a factory in Galle to assess the clarity, relevance, and simplicity of the questions. Finally, feedback from employees and management was used to refine the questionnaire, ensuring its appropriateness for the target populations of the study.

Several steps were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the study tools:

- ▶ **Content and consensual validity:** A Delphi process was employed with a panel of experts from fields such as occupational medicine, community medicine, and plantation management. The experts rated the questionnaire for appropriateness and cultural acceptability, and revisions were made based on their feedback.
- ▶ **Test-retest reliability:** The questionnaire was re-administered to a small sample of employees after two weeks, and the results of the test and retest showed a good level of agreement, with a correlation coefficient (Spearman's) of greater than 0.70 ($r \geq 0.70$).

The study investigation team was primarily selected based on their experience and qualifications in occupational safety and health, selected from experts who had been working with NIOSH or supporting NIOSH projects. The team received training on how to administer the questionnaire, including on how to explain technical terms in simple language, on avoiding interviewer bias, on how to correctly ask sensitive questions and on the collection of accurate data without influencing the respondents. A principal investigator ensured the quality of the data by checking questionnaires daily for completeness and clarity.

The data collection process involved several key steps:

- ▶ **Quantitative Data Collection:** In each plantation, the selected employees and managers were interviewed using the modified questionnaire. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes.
- ▶ **Qualitative Data Collection (FGDs):** Focus group discussions were held separately for employers and workers to collect qualitative data on OSH issues. These discussions provided deeper insights into the perceptions and challenges faced by different stakeholders in the coconut sector. The FGDs were structured using ILO guidelines, and the questions were designed to encourage open-ended responses, avoiding yes/no answers.
- ▶ **Stakeholder Interviews:** Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders such as members of the Coconut Growers Association and Coconut Planters' Association. Their experiences and perspectives on OSH were incorporated into the study.
- ▶ **NIOSH Observations:** The NIOSH team conducted site visits to the selected plantations and factories to document OSH practices and identify gaps. Their observations provided technical evidence on safety issues in the coconut sector.

The study followed ethical protocols to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, any OSH-related concerns raised by the participants during the study were addressed immediately where possible and appropriate. For instance, minor health issues such as back pain were treated on-site with painkillers.

3.3. Limitations of the study

Despite the thorough process and testing that follows the methodology of the ILO Research Manual, there are several limitations that could affect the reliability and/or applicability of the findings.

Firstly, it is notable that the diagnostic assessment was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic and during a time of political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka. The pandemic resulted in significantly reduced operations in both coconut plantations and factories. Due to pandemic-related health protocols, such as social distancing measures and lockdowns, fewer workers were present during the data collection period, resulting in challenges for the survey team in conducting the survey with a truly representative sample of the workforce. Furthermore, travel restrictions made it difficult for the research team to visit certain locations, which placed limitation on the geographic scope of the study.

A second limitation was the seasonal and temporary nature of work in the sector. Much of the work in coconut plantations, especially tasks like coconut plucking, is seasonal and performed by subcontracted workers. As a result, many workers were not consistently available, making it difficult to gather continuous data or detailed safety and health records from this segment of the workforce. Additionally, since these workers were often not permanently employed, the study was unable to obtain comprehensive employment and accident and injury records for them.

In smallholder plantations, the lines between who may be considered an 'employer' or a 'worker' are often blurred. Many smallholders rely on family labour, and the workforce in these settings often works in a fluid manner, with workers taking on multiple roles. Throughout the study, this complicated the process of collecting data and conducting FGDs that were separately related to the survey of 'employers' and 'workers'. Moreover, the small size of the workforce in these settings made it impractical to apply the same cross-sectional study methodology that had been used to identify workers in larger plantations. Therefore, only FGDs were used to collect data from smallholders, and all data from the findings relating to them below is from these discussions, meaning that the data is often difficult to directly compare with the data collected from large plantations.

It is important to note that the ILO had not previously worked with the employers and workers in the study, meaning that respondents may not have fully grasped often complex concepts such as OSH and FPRW, in order to effectively engage with the process. Definitions and perceptions of these concepts also differed in Sri Lankan plantations, meaning again that employers or workers were more likely to downplay the severity of accidents and illnesses.

Finally, a lack of formalized and systematic documentation of OSH practices and work-related accidents and diseases made it challenging for the study to evaluate the full extent of OSH issues. The absence of proper documentation, especially in the case of subcontracted workers, meant the assessment had to rely on the memories of the surveyed employers and workers, discussing past events.

These limitations do not negate the findings of the study but mean that they should be interpreted with caution and awareness of potential biases. The gaps and limitations of the study can also provide the basis for further research which supplements the findings and addresses some of its limitations to further develop a knowledge base for the coconut sector in Sri Lanka.

4.

Overview of the coconut sector and its stakeholders

4.1. Coconut production in Sri Lanka

In the local language of Sinhalese, the coconut tree is known as 'kalpavruka' meaning 'tree of life'. True to its name, the coconut tree and coconut production play crucial roles to Sri Lankan society and everyday life. Coconuts have grown naturally in Sri Lanka for thousands of years, and historical records show that local people were using coconuts for various purposes since at least 300 B.C., when the Greek ambassador of Seleucus I Nicator made reference to them in correspondence to the Indian King Chandragupta.¹¹ During the colonial era, Portuguese, Dutch and British explorers recognized the economic potential of coconut trees and began to cultivate them and develop the shoots of the industry. In the 19th Century, the British further developed production, beginning to establish export routes, as well as for coconut products including copra (dried coconut kernel) and coconut oil.¹²

Currently, Sri Lanka is the fourth-largest exporter of coconuts and coconut-based products in the world. In 2023, annual export revenue for the industry was US\$708.7 million. As of 2020, coconut production spanned over 443,500 hectares, with a target yield of around 2.5 to 3 billion coconuts.¹³

Sri Lanka produces a wide range of coconut-based products, including desiccated coconut, coconut water, copra, coconut oil, raw kernel, coconut cake, coconut toddy, coconut shell wood-based products, coconut leaves and coir pith.¹⁴ In 2020, over half of coconut products were derived from kernels, a little less than a third from coconut fibres, and the rest from coconut shells.¹⁵

Sri Lanka's coconut production is dominated by small farms, with over 80 per cent of total production attributed to smallholders. A smaller number of large plantation owners also operate in the sector, accounting for the remainder of production. The climate allows for harvesting of coconuts all year around, and use of insecticide, weedicide and fertiliser use is close to zero, meaning that Sri Lankan coconuts are predominantly organic. The industry is considered to be characterized by relatively low environmental impact farming, since very little water is needed for production and soil pollution is low.¹⁶

Generations of production have given local people expertise in coconut cultivation. Meanwhile, manufacturing expertise is held in both traditional and modern practices. For instance, bristle fibre products are manufactured using the indigenous 'drum' extraction method, which produces long and pure fibres. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka is one of the world's largest exporters of coconut shell activated carbon, which requires advanced manufacturing technology and highly skilled engineers.¹⁷

11 M. L. M. Salgado, [History and development of the coconut industry of Ceylon](#), Part I, Coconut Research Institute, Sri Lanka, 1955.

12 Kandetiva Agro Procuts, [Tracing the Ceylon coconut legacy through time](#), no date, accessed 2 October 2024.

13 Sri Lanka Export Development Board, [Coconuts and coconut based products](#), no date, accessed 1 October 2024.

14 Sri Lanka Export Development Board, [Amazing health benefits of coconut oil](#), no date, accessed 1 October 2024.

15 Sri Lanka Export Development Board, [Why Sri Lankan Coconut and coconut based products?](#), no date, accessed 1 October 2024.

16 Sri Lanka Export Development Board, [Why Sri Lankan Coconut and coconut based products?](#), no date, accessed 1 October 2024.

17 Sri Lanka Export Development Board, [Coconuts and coconut based products](#), no date, accessed 1 October 2024.

The production and processing of coconuts and coconut products is labour intensive. Work on the mostly small farms provides livelihoods to around 700,000 workers. Meanwhile, a further 135,00 workers benefit through indirect employment, such as in coconut-based product manufacturing and related services.¹⁸ The sector provides crucial opportunities for workers across the country, particularly in the traditional coconut triangle regions of Puttalam, Kurunegala and Negombo. In recent years, a new coconut triangle of the Jaffna, Mannar, and Mullaitivu districts has been promoted by the Government in order to boost production and export capabilities.¹⁹

4.1.1. Coconut production and associated OSH hazards and risks

Production of coconuts in Sri Lanka involves a number of distinct stages and processes. These are each associated with specific OSH hazards and risks (see Table 1). These production stages are:

- i. **Land preparation:** involves tasks such as clearing vegetation, ploughing, and levelling the land to create a suitable environment for planting saplings. This process tends to involve manual labour and hand tools. Workers are at risk of musculoskeletal disorders from prolonged periods of manual labour and injuries and cuts from the tools associated with their work.
- ii. **Coconut plucking:** coconut harvesting is carried out every 45 days, using two primary methods, climbing trees and the use long bamboo poles. Both methods are physically demanding, and workers climbing tall trees face significant risks of falling, particularly due to a lack of safety harnesses. Repetitive strain on legs and arm muscles can contribute to long-term physical injuries. Using bamboo poles requires prolonged neck extension and balance, posing the risk of musculoskeletal disorders. Without protective headgear, there is a significant risk of injury to head and body from falling coconuts.
- iii. **Mulching and manoeuvring:** mulching involves collecting fallen leaves and bedding them around coconut trees to maintain soil moisture. This often involves the use of awkward postures and prolonged bending of the back, which can lead to back pain and other ergonomic issues. Weeding is a common task during non-harvesting periods, which can be strenuous and increase the risk of such injuries, particularly for women workers who are often employed in this work.
- iv. **Coir and coconut processing:** in coconut factories, workers are involved in tasks such as removing coconut husks, scraping coconuts, and extracting coir fibres. This work involves the use sharp tools, which places workers at risk of cuts and hand injuries. Factories are often dusty, and workers may lack protective masks or gloves, increasing the risks of respiratory issues and skin irritation. Heavy and often outdated machinery, that can lack proper safety guards, pose further hazards to the safety and health of workers.
- v. **Coconut product manufacturing:** workers are involved in the production of products such as coconut oil, coir mats and desiccated coconut. This stage often includes operating heavy machinery and the handling

¹⁸ Sri Lanka Export Development Board, [Industry capability of coconut and coconut-based product sector in Sri Lanka](#), no date, accessed 1 October 2024.

¹⁹ Ceylon Exports and Trading Pvt Ltd, [2023 Coconut market update](#), 2023.

of raw materials. Dust from coir fibre production can be hazardous to respiratory health, and workers can suffer injuries from machinery due to inadequate machine guarding or malfunctioning equipment. Respiratory issues, injuries from sharp tools, and ergonomic risks from lifting heavy loads are also significant concerns during this stage.

- vi. **Transportation and loading:** Workers responsible for transporting and loading coconuts face risks associated with repetitive lifting, which can result in back injuries. Potential injuries arise from falling objects or accidents during loading.

Table 1: Hazards and risks associated with coconut production

Process	Tasks involved	Potential OSH hazards and risks
1. Land preparation	Clearing, ploughing, levelling the land	Risks of musculoskeletal disorders, accidents with tools, dust exposure
2. Coconut plucking	Climbing trees or using long bamboo poles to harvest coconuts.	Falls from heights, muscle strain from repetitive tasks, injuries from falling coconuts.
3. Mulching and manoeuvring	Collecting fallen leaves and bedding them around the trees to maintain soil moisture, weeding.	Ergonomic injuries from awkward postures, back pain from prolonged bending.
4. Coir and coconut processing	Removing coconut husks, scraping coconuts, extracting coir fibres.	Hand injuries from sharp tools, respiratory issues from dust, injuries from unguarded machinery.
5. Coconut product manufacturing	Operating machinery, handling materials	Respiratory issues from dust, injuries from machinery, ergonomic risks
6. Transport and loading	Transporting and loading coconuts for further processing.	Back injuries from repetitive lifting, injuries from falling objects, lack of PPE.

► **Figure 2:** Coconut workers working in the fields without footwear or uniforms



► **Figure 3:** Field preparation for planting coconuts



4.2. Tripartite constituents and stakeholders in the sector

The Sri Lankan coconut sector involves various key actors including government bodies, employers' associations, trade unions, and stakeholders such as development organizations and certification agencies.

4.2.1. Government

Government bodies involved in the coconut sector include:

- ▶ **Ministry of Labour and Department of Labour:** the key regulatory bodies responsible for labour policies and the enforcement of OSH standards across industries, including the coconut sector. They are responsible for ensuring that workplace safety regulations are followed and contribute to the formulation of policies related to workers' rights and safety.
- ▶ **National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH):** NIOSH plays a crucial role in promoting OSH awareness and capacity building. It provides training, conducts risk assessments, and helps in policy formulation for OSH improvements in the coconut industry.
- ▶ **Ministry of Plantations:** oversees the overall functioning of the coconut sector, including the development of plantations. The Ministry also collaborates with other entities in implementing OSH standards in the coconut sector.
- ▶ **National Institute of Plantation Management (NIPM):** serves as the primary training and educational body for Sri Lanka's plantation sector, offering professional development, management training, and research programmes to enhance the skills and competencies of those involved in tea, rubber, coconut, and other plantation industries. NIPM plays a crucial role in capacity building, promoting good governance, and supporting sustainable practices in the sector. It also provides diploma and certificate courses, aiming to develop future leaders and professionals in plantation management.
- ▶ **Ministry of Health:** through its public health divisions, the ministry supports the welfare of plantation workers by providing health services, including maternal and child healthcare, vaccination programmes, and general health awareness.
- ▶ **Coconut Development Authority (CDA):** the CDA focuses on promoting the development and export of coconut products, ensuring compliance with government standards for production and safety.
- ▶ **Coconut Cultivation Board (CCB):** responsible for promoting and managing coconut cultivation and productivity. It provides technical support to farmers, distributes high-yield seedlings, and promotes sustainable farming practices. While focused on increasing productivity, the CCB works with other agencies to address sectoral challenges, although without a strong emphasis on OSH issues.
- ▶ **Coconut Research Institute (CRISL):** a leading research institution dedicated to the development, sustainability, and productivity of the coconut sector. Established in 1929, CRI focuses on scientific research, innovation, and the dissemination of knowledge to improve the productivity of coconut plantations while addressing challenges in climate resilience.

4.2.2. Tripartite organizations

The **Plantation Human Development Trust (PHDT)** is a tripartite organization, governed by a board of directors from the Government of Sri Lanka, RPCs and sectoral trade unions. The PHDT is responsible for improving the health and welfare of workers in coconut plantations. It coordinates healthcare services and welfare initiatives for plantation workers and their families, working closely with employers and government health services. The PHDT works closely with government ministries, trade unions, RPCs, and other stakeholders to deliver services focussing on housing and infrastructure, water and sanitation, health and nutrition, childcare, estate worker housing cooperatives, training and physical exercise and sports.

4.2.3. Employers' organizations

Employers' organizations in the coconut sector include:

- ▶ **Coconut Growers Association:** represents the interests of coconut plantation owners and larger-scale producers. It advocates for sector development and engages in discussions about OSH, acknowledging the need for improvements in worker safety and welfare.
- ▶ **Coconut Planters' Association:** like the Growers Association, this body focuses on supporting plantation owners by addressing issues related to production, management, and worker safety.

4.2.4. Trade unions

Unionization in the coconut sector is low, particularly in comparison to the tea sector. This is principally due to the number of smallholders and small enterprises operating in the sector and the diversification of products. However, there are trade unions that work across different crops including in the coconut sector. These include:

- ▶ **Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC)**
- ▶ **Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU)**

4.2.5. Other stakeholders

Other stakeholders engaged in the coconut sector in Sri Lanka include:

- ▶ **Coconut Research Institute:** this organization focuses on improving the technical aspects of coconut cultivation and product development. However, the report notes that it has not placed a strong emphasis on occupational safety and health issues.
- ▶ **Non-governmental organizations (NGOs):** NGOs have been involved in worker welfare initiatives, offering programs on health awareness, gender equality, financial management, and other social concerns within the sector.

5. Findings

In this section, the findings of various comparative analyses are presented, along with analyses and descriptive summaries (typically presented as tables). Further extended written commentary compares and contrasts the selected countries on each reviewed characteristic.

5.1. Types of enterprises

The diagnostic assessment studied two types of enterprises in Sri Lanka's coconut sector, large coconut plantations and smallholder farms. In summary:

- i. **Large plantations:** are enterprises with formalized structure and employed labourers who handle the tasks involved in cultivation and processing. As per the findings below, workers are both employed on temporary and permanent bases, with some tasks often outsourced.
- ii. **Smallholder farms:** are typically village-based, smaller-scale operations run by families or individual smallholders. The workforce tends to be informal, with family members and a few paid workers performing seasonal tasks.

5.2. Employment conditions

5.2.1. Demographic distribution

Among the surveyed workforce, there was significant diversity in terms of gender, age and ethnicity. Over half of the workers (57 per cent) were men, with women therefore representing a significant proportion of the workforce (see Table 2). Men dominated tasks which were perceived as physically demanding, including coconut picking and handling heavy machinery. Women tended to be employed as helpers, with over 70 per cent of women assisting in various stages of plantation upkeep, processing, mulching and weeding. These gender differences were more pronounced and formalized in large plantations, while in smaller farms the division of labour was more blurred and informal, with men and women both assisting in a variety of tasks, though men still tended to perform more physically intensive work.

Table 2: Demographic composition of the surveyed workforce

Task	Women (%)	Men (%)
Coconut plucking	0	16.9
Field supervisor	0	8.8
Security	0	14
Helpers	70.5	45.6
Clerical/admin roles	6.2	0.6
Coconut cracking and processing	3.0	3.0
Total percentage of workforce	43.0	57.0

The majority of plantation workers surveyed were Sinhalese (92.7 per cent) with the remaining 7.3 per cent as Tamil. This reflects regional demographic patterns in the areas of Kurunegala and Puttalam, where the Sinhalese population is considerably larger than the Tamil population. There were no significant differences in the ethnic distribution between large plantations and smallholder farms, with both heavily relying on local labour drawn from the surrounding villages.

The surveyed workforce in plantations tended to consist of older workers, with a significant proportion over the age of 45 (see Table 3). The single largest group of workers was those aged 45 to 49 years, representing 22 per cent of the workforce. Furthermore, 38.7 per cent were over the age of 50. Younger workers were scarce, with only 3 per cent of the workforce under 30 years old. This highlights a trend towards younger persons preferring alternative employment opportunities in industrial zones or other sectors that they perceive to have better working conditions and standards of living. Wages in the sector are low and young women suggested that they were better paid in the garment and other manufacturing sectors. This workforce trend is particularly pronounced in larger plantations, while smallholder farms still have some younger family members assisting in tasks during peak seasons.

Table 3: Age composition of the surveyed workforce

Age group	Percentage (%)
16-19	0.0
20-24	3.0
25-29	2.7
30-34	9.0
35-39	10.7
40-44	14.0
45-49	22.0
50-54	19.0
55 and over	19.7

5.2.2. Living arrangements

As opposed to the tea and rubber sectors, where line houses are commonly provided by the employers, all workers surveyed in the coconut sector lived in privately-owned homes in nearby villages. This reflects the community-based nature of coconut farming, a characteristic that is particularly strong in smallholder farms. Compared to other plantation sectors, these living arrangements reflected a closer integration with traditional village life and a lower level of dependence on employers for accommodation. While the majority of surveyed workers were Sinhalese, communities were typically integrated and workers of different ethnicities reported that they tended to live peacefully alongside each other, sharing many cultural practices, rituals and beliefs, and often inter-marrying.

5.2.3. *Employment and contract status*

The coconut sector in Sri Lanka is characterized by a mix of permanent and temporary employment, with clear distinctions between large plantations and smallholder farms in terms of employment contracts and the nature of job roles.

In large coconut plantations, the surveyed workforce was more formalized, with a majority of the workers (59.3 per cent) hired on a permanent basis (see Table 4). These workers enjoyed relatively stable employment conditions and access to benefits such as employer contributions to provident funds, allowing them to withdraw pensions upon retirement, set at 20 per cent of the basic salary. The majority of the remainder of the workforce (40.3 per cent) was employed on a temporary or seasonal basis, meaning that their employment was more precarious and often limited to peak harvesting periods or specific tasks like coconut plucking. Both permanent workers and temporary workers lacked formal working contracts, with 87.3 per cent of workers saying that they did not have such a contract agreement.

Smallholder farms tended to operate under less formal employment structures. The workforce was usually made up of family members, supplemented by a few paid daily workers, employed during peak times. Employment contracts were almost non-existent, and much of the work carried out was seasonal and flexible. The lack of formal contracts also means that the workers on smallholder farms did not have the same employment protections or benefits as the workers on large plantations.

Table 4: Employment status of surveyed workers

Employment status	Number	Percentage (%)
Permanent	178	59.3
Temporary	121	40.3
Trainee	1	0.3
Total	300	100

Regarding duration of employment, 16.3 per cent of workers had been with their employer for only one month to one year; 29.3 per cent for two to five years; 20.7 per cent for six to 10 years; 19.7 per cent for 11 to 20 years; 9.3 per cent for 21 to 30 years; and 4.3 per cent for more than 30 years. This shows that while there are significant numbers of new workers in the sector, the majority of the workforce is engaged in long-term employment in the sector.

According to the diagnostic assessment, only 23.8 per cent of surveyed workers were entitled to paid leave. This was seen with both women and men, with 78.4 per cent of women and 71.3 per cent of men reporting that they were not entitled to annual paid leave. Among those who were entitled, only 7 per cent had taken annual leave during the year covered by the survey.

5.2.4. Working hours

The majority of the surveyed workers worked standard full-time hours. 80.3 per cent of workers worked for eight hours per day, while the remainder worked between four and seven hours per day. A similar pattern was seen in weekly hours, with 73.3 per cent of workers working a full 40-hour week, while a smaller proportion worked between 30 to 40 hours per week (15.7 per cent) or 20 to 30 hours per week (10.3 per cent). Less than 1 per cent of workers reported working fewer than 20 hours per week. There was a noticeable gender difference, with 93 per cent of women workers working 8 hours per day, compared to 70.8 per cent of men, which likely stems from the requirements of the different tasks they tend to be assigned on plantations.

Table 5: Hours worked per day among surveyed workers

Hours per Day	Women (%)	Men (%)	Total Percentage (%)
8 or more hours	93.0	70.8	80.3
4-7 hours	7.0	29.2	19.7

5.3. Occupational safety and health

5.3.1. Accidents and injuries at work

The coconut sector in Sri Lanka poses several occupational safety risks, particularly for workers involved in physically demanding tasks such as coconut plucking. A small but significant proportion (4.3 per cent) of the surveyed workers had experienced work-related accidents in the past 12 months. These accidents predominantly involved injuries from snake bites, which accounted for 69.2 per cent of all accidents. Other causes of accidents reported by workers included commuter or vehicle accidents (23.1 per cent) and falls from height (7.7 per cent). FGDs revealed that some workers had experienced coconuts falling onto their head or body, though respondents claimed this was without injury. Workers also acknowledged the risk of trips and falls, though stated that when such accidents occurred, they did not report them, as they were seen as 'simple' accidents associated with their work.

Notably, the data highlighted a significant gender discrepancy in the incidence of accidents and injuries. 7.8 per cent of women workers reported experiencing work-related accidents, compared to only 1.8 per cent of men. The difference may be attributed to the tasks performed by women, which more regularly involved exposure to wildlife, and particularly snakes, within the plantations.

Table 6: Summary table of accidents and injuries at work among surveyed workers

Accidents	Number of workers			Percentage of workers (%)		
Number of accidents						
Experienced accidents	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
	10	3	13	7.8	1.8	4.3
Did not experience accidents	119	168	287	92.2	98.2	95.7
Type of accident (or no accident) reported to the survey team						
Falling from height	1			0.3		
Stuck by falling objects	0			0		
Commuter or vehicle accidents	3			1.0		
Caught in between objects	0			0		
Snake bites	9			3.0		
No accident	287			92.7		

Despite the OSH hazards and risks associated with their work, workers tended to perceive their workplaces to be safe. Of the workers surveyed, 83.8 per cent considered their workplace to be 'safe', while a small number considered the workplace to be 'very safe' (2.7 per cent). Only 0.7 per cent perceived the workplace to be 'not safe', with the rest (13 per cent) unsure of whether it was safe or unsafe. Just under a third of workers (30.3 per cent) said that they worked with hazardous machinery, with more men than women involved in tasks that used such machinery, including cutting tools, hot corrosives and electrical tools. Rather than highlighting safe workplaces, this perception highlights a lack of knowledge and understanding in regard to the occupational hazards and risks associated with their work.

Other data further suggested that knowledge and training related to safety and health at work among the surveyed employers and workers was very low. 97.7 per cent of workers declared that they had not received any training related to their tasks, which included all women workers. Only a small amount of work with heavy machinery, carried out exclusively by men, was deemed worthy of safety and health training by employers. Furthermore, the same percentage of workers had not received fire safety and were not aware how to mitigate fires, even in their own homes. No worker had received safety and health training regarding electric shocks. Furthermore, FGDs revealed that both coconut plantation employers and workers were unfamiliar with the concept of OSH, the importance of OSH management, and the fundamental right to safe and healthy workplaces.

Worker knowledge and understanding was also low in regard to insurance cover and compensation. Only 1.7 per cent of workers stated that they had adequate knowledge regarding compensation cover. However, in contradictory findings, 4.3 per cent of workers claimed they had received compensation, the same number that reported to the survey team that they had experienced an accident. Among

the sample group, 14.3 per cent of workers believed that employers should bear the costs of a work-related accident, while 46.7 per cent felt the worker should bear the cost, and the rest did not know. This reflects a low awareness of employer responsibility among workers, as well as the informalized nature of work in the sector, with few formal protections.

The general lack of OSH knowledge among employers and workers highlights a significant issue and barrier to safety and health. Employers and workers do not perceive their workplaces to be hazardous because they are not aware of the OSH hazards and risks associated with their work. 97 per cent of workers stated that they did not know what to do or were unaware of the dangers present in their work environment. Only a small fraction of workers, 1.8 per cent, indicated that they felt that they could raise concerns about being exposed to danger, while the vast majority felt unsure about how to act or remove themselves from a dangerous situation upon experiencing unsafe conditions.

The systemic gap in knowledge and training on workplace safety and health indicates that workers in the coconut sector are not empowered or equipped with the knowledge and tools to identify, report, and respond to OSH hazards and risks. This almost certainly contributes to an underreporting of accidents and injuries at work, paired with a cultural tendency to downplay and/or decline to report accidents and injuries. Improving OSH systems, including reporting mechanisms, and promoting employer and worker training and awareness on the subject is essential to improving safety and health in the sector.

5.3.2. Worker health

The diagnostic assessment investigated worker health issues both before and after recruitment. Upon recruitment, 85.4 per cent of the workers reported that they did not experience diseases or ill-health (see Table 7). Of those who did report ill-health, 6.7 per cent experienced joint pains, 3.3 per cent of workers experienced back pains and a small number experienced other issues such as breathing problems, visual disturbances, allergies, digestive problems, hearing problems or chronic coughs. Notably, the percentage of women with joint pains (14.7 per cent) and back pains (4.7 per cent) was much higher than that of men (0.6 per cent and 2.3 per cent respectively). Crucially, 96 per cent of workers said that they had not received a medical examination upon recruitment, meaning that there is significant risk that workers' pre-existing health conditions could later worsen due to the physically demanding tasks associated with their work.

Following recruitment, 92.6 per cent of workers claimed that they did not have any ill-health or diseases related to their work. 3.3 per cent of workers stated that they had joint pain after recruitment, and 3.3 per cent of the workers had back pain after recruitment. A small percentage of workers (0.7 per cent) reported digestive problems. While workers did not recognize other issues that they faced as being work-related, this nevertheless highlights a significant proportion who had musculoskeletal issues attributed to their work. Among the sample, 9.7 per cent of workers stated that they suffer symptoms related to a disease, either pre-existing or work-related, on a daily basis. Note that this should not be interpreted as workers symptoms decreasing following recruitment, but only these percentages of workers reporting new symptoms that they attributed to their work.

Table 7: Summary table of health issues reported by surveyed workers before and after recruitment

Health issue	Percentage of workers on recruitment (%)	Percentage of workers post-recruitment (work-related) (%)
Breathing difficulties + asthma	0.7	0
Joint pains	6.7	3.3
Back pains	3.3	3.3
Chronic cough and/or cold	0.3	0
Visual disturbances	0.7	0
Allergies	0.7	0
Digestive problems	0.7	0.7
Hearing problems	0.7	0
None of these	85.4	92.6

Given the lack of safety and health training for workers (see section 5.3.1.), workers are very likely not aware that exposure to OSH hazards and risks can manifest as ill-health years after performing their tasks, and particularly from prolonged exposure. Workers may also not realise that the diseases they are suffering from are work-related, instead attributing them to their daily lives. per with accidents and injuries, a lack of knowledge and awareness, alongside ineffective or non-existent reporting mechanisms may lead to significant underreporting of work-related diseases. Ensuring effective OSH management systems, where employers and workers and properly trained on OSH issues is essential to improving safety and health for all workers in the coconut sector.

5.3.3. Alcohol and substance use

The diagnostic assessment examined alcohol and substance use among workers in the coconut plantations (see Table 8). According to the results, a relatively small percentage (17 per cent) of the workers stated that they drank alcohol. However, there was a significant difference between genders, with only a 4.7 per cent of women and 40.9 per cent of men stating that they drank alcohol. A lower percentage of men (7 per cent) reported that they drank alcohol daily. A large number of workers (42.7 per cent) reported that they chewed betel, a habit which is linked to mouth cancer. Men (52.6 per cent) tended to chew betel more frequently than women (29.5 per cent). Workers were also surveyed on smoking, however, there were inconsistencies in the data related to other reports in the diagnostic assessment, so comparable data to those in the studies on the tea and rubber sectors has not been included in this analytical summary, nevertheless, smoking is still relatively commonplace and requires attention to promote worker health.

Table 8: Alcohol and substance abuse among surveyed workers

Substance	Percentage of men (%)	Percentage of women(%)	Total percentage (%)
Alcohol use	40.9	4.7	25.3
Betel chewing	52.6	29.5	42.7

The results of the study suggested that use of alcohol and betel, and likely smoking, were still very high among plantation workers, and higher than on other plantations such as the tea and rubber sectors. This highlights a need for education and awareness programmes for the sector's workers, in order to promote a better understanding of the risks of these practices and reduce their use among communities.

5.3.4. Absenteeism and sick leave

According to the results of the diagnostic assessment, absenteeism in the sector is typically low. As above, 4.3 per cent of surveyed workers had experienced work-related accidents during the past 12 months. All of those who did took leave of more than a week to recover from their injuries, while no shorter-term leave periods of less than a week were reported. Regarding sick leave, 6.3 per cent reported having used sick leave within the last 12 months, with 1.7 per cent using between one and 10 days, and 4.7 per cent using 21 days or more. 8.5 per cent of women stated that they had taken 21 or more days leave in contrast to only 1.8 per cent of men.

With almost 5 per cent of the workforce having reported taking leave of 21 days or more due to sickness, it suggests that worker absence could be a significant issue for the sector. Worker absences due to work-related accidents or diseases can indicate poor safety and health at work and lead to lower productivity. Where workers are not effectively covered by protections such as sick pay, workers may lose wages as a result of taking time off work or opt not to take sufficient time in order to fully recover due to the opportunity cost of doing so, potentially leading to longer-term health issues.

5.3.5. Access to water and sanitary facilities

According to the diagnostic analysis, all surveyed workers stated that clean drinking water was accessible at their workplaces. However, these workers were also bringing their own water bottles to the fields, suggesting that they provided the water themselves. Additionally, all workers reported having access to clean toilet facilities at factories. However, during focus group discussions field workers revealed that there were no toilet facilities to use in the fields. The study also noted that the facilities that did exist for women and men were not always separate, with the majority (52.7 per cent) of employers failing to provide gender-specific sanitary facilities.

5.3.6. Medical services and clinics

According to interviews with the area Medical Officers of Health (MOH), the medical services and health support provided at plantations are mostly through public health staff. The involvement of the MOH extends beyond plantation workers to include village communities. The public health staff focuses on child welfare, antenatal clinics, maternal health, and family planning clinics, providing essential healthcare services like vaccinations, nutritional advice, and monitoring early childhood development.

In general, workers do not receive medical check-ups. According to the findings, only 36 per cent of employers conduct annual medical check-ups by qualified doctors. As per above, workers do not receive medicals upon recruitment, meaning that it can be hard to identify existing health issues, assign suitable work tasks given any medical conditions, and track the impact of work on worker health.

Overall, the survey did not find that the services provided could qualify as occupational health services, in line with the ILO Occupational Health Services Convention, 1985 (No. 161) and its accompanying Recommendation (No. 171). Providing occupational health services in the coconut sector, as per the guidance is Convention No. 161 and Recommendation No. 171, can play critical role in safeguarding workers' safety and health, reducing and lowering the impact of accidents and diseases, improving overall wellbeing of workers and contributing to increased productivity.

5.3.7. OSH committees

OSH committees had not been established among the surveyed enterprises in the coconut sector, neither in large plantations nor smallholder farms. None of the employers surveyed had appointed a qualified safety officer, nor had they designated persons to undertake safety and health responsibilities. All of the surveyed workers stated that their voices and issues were not addressed in a collective manner and that, therefore, none of their suggestions had been taken into consideration for making safety improvements for the workplace.

OSH committees play a critical role in promoting safety and health at work by fostering worker participation in decision making regarding safety issues. Committees help to identify and assess workplace risks, propose practical solutions, and facilitate ongoing dialogue between workers and management. By involving workers in the development of OSH policies, committees ensure that preventive measures are more effectively implemented, ultimately reducing accidents and improving workplace conditions, helping to build a preventative safety culture in the coconut sector.

5.3.8. Risk assessments

Risk assessments had not been widely carried out among the sample group. Only 36 per cent of the employers stated that they carried out risk assessments: 20 per cent of employers stated that they carried out risk assessments once a year, 10 per cent once a quarter, 2 per cent once a month and 4 per cent once a week. Even among the employers who reported to the survey team that they had conducted risk assessments; it is not clear that they fully understood what conducting a risk assessment entailed. For instance, it appears very unlikely that any employer would conduct a risk assessment every week at the plantation level. While separate data was not collected for small plantations, it is highly likely that risk assessments are not carried out, due to a lack of formal OSH management systems.

Risk assessments are essential for identifying and evaluating potential hazards and risks in the coconut sector, both in fields and in factories. By systematically assessing risks, employers can implement effective preventative and protective measures to eliminate or mitigate risks and hazards, protecting workers and increasing workplace productivity. A lack of risk assessment in the sector reflects a broader lack of education and knowledge regarding safety and health of both employers and workers and highlights why there may be underreporting of safety and health issues, with employers and workers unaware of workplace hazards and risks and the likelihood and severity of harm from them.

5.3.9. Use of PPE

The diagnostic assessment found that 80 per cent of the surveyed workers were not using any form of PPE while carrying out their work. Meanwhile, 15.3 per cent of workers reporting that they regularly used PPE during their work tasks, and 4.6 per cent of workers using PPE on occasion. There was no significant difference in PPE usage by gender, with 16.3 per cent of women and 14.6 per cent of men indicating that they had used PPE.

Almost all workers (97.7 per cent) reported that they had not received any formal training on the use of PPE or job-related safety. Subsequently, only a small number of workers (2.3 per cent) had received training on PPE use in their day-to-day work.

The low provision of, use of and training on PPE in the coconut sector is of concern due to the number of associated tasks that involve handling heavy equipment, climbing tall coconut trees and hazardous working environments. The results of the diagnostic assessment highlight that both the provision of PPE and training on its use are an important area for improvement in workplace safety and health. While the most critical interventions for the sector involve ensuring effective OSH management in order to eliminate and controls risks, where risks remain, PPE should be used to mitigate the risks to workers in the coconut sector and appropriate trainings on their use should be conducted.

5.4. Realization of other fundamental principles and rights at work

5.4.1. The elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation

The findings of the diagnostic assessment suggest that instances of discrimination were either not widely perceived or openly acknowledged among the employers or workers surveyed. All workers reported that they did not perceive that they had been subject to any form of discrimination from management based on factors such as ethnicity, social background, political opinion, or religion during recruitment. Employers echoed this sentiment, stating that they had not based their recruitment decisions on criteria such as gender, marital status, or disability. Discrimination based on HIV/AIDS status was also found to not be a factor in hiring, with employers claiming that HIV/AIDS status was not a consideration in

their recruitment practices. The vast majority of employers (98.4 per cent) declared that they provided equal pay for equal work for women and men. However, a small minority (1.6 per cent) admitted to gender-based pay differences, with men receiving higher pay for the same work.

The diagnostic assessment also highlighted a perceived absence of harassment in the workplace, with none of the surveyed workers reporting that they had experienced verbal or physical harassment related to grounds such as ethnicity, gender, religion, or political opinion. Employers stated that they had not received complaints of harassment from their workers, reinforcing the finding that discrimination and harassment are either rare or go underreported in the sector.

None of the surveyed workers reported to the survey team that they were aware of domestic violence taking place in their homes. However, it should be noted that domestic violence was an extremely sensitive issue among the sampled population, with workers considering it to be a taboo to discuss internal family matters with others. Meanwhile, while employers stated that they had not officially received complaints related to domestic violence, some showed recognition of its potential impact on the workforce, for example, through collaborating with NGOs to organize training programmes aimed at addressing domestic violence.

While discrimination was not widely reported among the surveyed employers and workers, it should be noted that this does not mean that it does not take place. Factors such as a lack of knowledge and understanding as to what constitutes discrimination, a lack of effective mechanisms to report discrimination, and a cultural reluctance to discuss discrimination could all lead to an underreporting of cases to the survey team. Implementing labour laws against discriminatory practices, including through labour inspections, establishing reporting mechanisms at the plantation level and educating employers and workers on anti-discriminatory practices can help to empower workers to speak up about discriminatory practices and to reduce discrimination in coconut plantations.

5.4.2. Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining

The findings of the diagnostic assessment suggest severe gaps in the realization of freedom of association and collective bargaining in the coconut sector in Sri Lanka. None of the workers surveyed were unionized or part of any type of formal or informal workers' organization. All employers confirmed that there were no mechanisms for collective bargaining in place, and that none of their workers were involved in trade unions. Dialogue between employers and workers was limited, with 97.7 per cent of workers stating that they were unaware of channels through which they could raise concerns regarding their working conditions or engage in constructive dialogue. As per section 4.2.4, trade unions that cover work in the plantations sector exist, and in theory these also cover work in the coconut sector. However, the findings suggest that workers are not actively participating in these unions, and that the unions are not effectively reaching the workers in the sector.

Freedom of association and collective bargaining are crucial for safeguarding workers' rights, promoting safe and healthy workplaces and effective OSH management systems, and for promoting strong industrial relations that benefit

both workers and employers through peace and stability. It is clear that support is needed for the establishment and development of trade unions in the sector, including through capacity building, provision of resources and awareness raising amongst workers. The ILO Collective Bargaining Convention, 1981 (No. 154) and its Recommendation (No. 163) provide guidance on measures to support and promote collective bargaining.

6. Conclusions

The diagnostic assessment examined the application of the right to a safe and healthy working environment in Sri Lanka's coconut sector, alongside interrelated FPRW on discrimination and freedom of association and collective bargaining. It focussed on coconut farms and factories operating in the sector, and on both large plantations and smallholder farms, using IDIs, KIIs, FGDs and direct observations made during field surveys for data collection.

From the findings of the diagnostic assessment, it is possible to draw conclusions in a number of key areas:

- ▶ **employment** – the sector's workers are employed on a mixture of permanent and temporary bases. In large plantations, work is formalized to a higher degree, and some workers benefit from schemes such as provident funds. In smallholder farms, work is typically informal, consisting of family members and a few casual daily workers. The vast majority of workers did not have contract agreements, with the few who did being permanent workers on large plantations. A lack of formal working contracts makes it more difficult to extend workers' rights, including safety and health and interrelated FPRW, to workers. Unlike the tea and rubber sectors, workers are not provided accommodation by their employers, instead living on private homes in the surrounding villages. The sector has a large representation of women in the workforce, who tend to be engaged in tasks that are perceived to be less physically demanding, while men are employed in coconut picking and the handling of heavy machinery. It is notable that the sector has an ageing workforce, with younger workers increasingly likely to pursue higher education or seek work in industrial zones or other sectors with higher wages and/or better working conditions or work-life balance. This points to potential sectoral issues in the future, regarding attracting sufficient and adequately skilled workers, which could limit Government plans to expand production and trade and decent work opportunities in the sector.
- ▶ **Legal and regulatory framework related to OSH** – the legal and regulatory framework governing work in the coconut sector, including on OSH, remains relatively weak. Labour law and regulations are spread across various instruments, and no single OSH law exists to govern OSH practices, while the ILO advocates for a universal coverage of overarching OSH laws that should be applicable to all workers in all branches of economic activity. The proposed revisions to national labour law present the opportunity strengthen the legal and regulatory basis to promote decent work in the coconut sector and throughout the world of work. Given the strategic importance of the coconut sector, and the large numbers of workers, consideration of OSH and interrelated FPRW should be given priority when adopting, updating and revising laws and regulations. Consideration of smallholder farms and enterprises in the coconut sector, and the particularly acute challenges they face in regard to OSH standards is also essential to the effective realization of decent work in the sector.
- ▶ **OSH practice** – work in the coconut sector is hazardous, with workers exposed to hazards and risks such as falling coconuts, sharp tools, snake bites, trips and falls. Factory workers are exposed to dust, high noise levels and often outdated heavy machinery. Nevertheless, employers and workers tend to perceive work in the sector as safe, and relatively few incidents of work-related accidents and diseases were reported to the survey team. However, no data was collected nor maintained by employers on chronic health issues that could be work-related. Rather than indicating a low level of accidents and diseases,

this highlights a low level of OSH knowledge and awareness in the sector, with neither surveyed employers nor workers having a sound understanding of the concept or importance of OSH management, while workers did not receive training on safety and health. This very likely contributes to an underreporting of OSH incidents, with neither employers or workers empowered or equipped with the knowledge and tools to identify, report, and respond to safety hazards and risks and a widespread absence of adequate reporting mechanisms. OSH committees and safety officers are non-existent, further highlighting a lack of OSH management and the importance of increasing worker participation in the process. Risk assessments are rare, meaning that there is a lack of systematic identification and assessment of OSH issues in the workplace. Only one in five workers have access to PPE in order to mitigate the risks they are exposed to and those that do have access do not receive training on its proper use.

In relation to the realization of two interrelated FPRW:

- ▶ ***discrimination*** – discrimination in respect of employment and occupation was not widely reported in the coconut sector. All employers and workers reported that they did not discriminate nor feel discriminated against on the basis of factors such as gender, ethnicity, social background, political opinion, or religion. Most employers claimed to provide equal pay for work of equal value, however, a small number (1.6 per cent) admitted to paying higher wages to men than to women. No worker reported suffering from verbal or physical harassment from management. Meanwhile, no worker reported that domestic violence took place in the home, though this was a very sensitive issue among the sample group, and NGO reports and presence aimed at addressing domestic violence in villages suggests that it is still commonplace. As well as cultural sensitivities potentially leading to non-disclosure of discrimination to the survey team, there tended to be a lack of knowledge and understanding as to what constitutes discrimination, as well as a lack of effective or formalized mechanisms in place to report discrimination. This means that while findings of the diagnostic assessment suggested a low incidence of discrimination, they do not mean that discrimination does not take place.
- ▶ ***collective bargaining and freedom of association*** – the results of the diagnostic assessment in the coconut sector suggest that while trade unions that cover all plantations do exist, no worker among the surveyed population stated that they were involved in such unions, and no employers were aware of their existence or workers participating in their activities. Consequently, workers in the survey did not exercise the right to collective bargaining, with no formal dialogue taking place between employers and workers in regard to their working conditions. This highlights severe gaps in the realization of collective bargaining and freedom of association for workers, and a lack of strong industrial relations that could help promote improved working conditions, including safety and health at work.

7. Recommendations

From the assessment and conclusions on the realization of the right to a safe and healthy working environment, alongside interrelated FPRW on freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation, a number of measures can be taken to promote safety and health and work and ensure the effective realization of worker's rights in the coconut sector in Sri Lanka. Governments, employers, trade unions and workers each have important roles to play in advancing decent work in the sector through the realization of safe and healthy workplaces and other FPRW. These recommendations can help boost the sector in terms of increasing productivity, realizing its potential for sustainable growth and the creation of decent jobs within Sri Lanka.

Government

- ▶ As Sri Lanka proceeds with measures to introduce new employment laws, there is a significant opportunity to address OSH, as well as other interrelated FPRW, in the coconut sector. National laws should specifically address issues regarding workers' rights to safe and healthy workplaces. It is also important to address non-discrimination in respect of employment and occupation, and freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. In order to ensure protection for as many workers as possible, including smallholder farmers, the law should provide universal coverage for all workers, including agricultural workers, and those in the informal economy. The ILO can provide technical assistance to the Government in this process.
- ▶ In the absence of comprehensive OSH law, ILO-OSH 2001 can provide guidance to develop measures to ensure safe and healthy workplaces in the coconut sector.²⁰ According to ILO guidance, the Government of Sri Lanka should:
 - (1) Strengthen OSH related policies and frameworks, including through the adoption and implementation of the National OSH policy and Programme (2024-2027) and institutionalization of a national tripartite OSH committee;
 - (2) Build a culture of prevention through awareness raising of the importance of OSH, including a focus on workers' health and promoting proactive measures to foster safe and healthy workplaces. Promoting tripartite social dialogue between governments, employers' organizations and trade unions on OSH is important in this regard;
 - (3) Strengthen the capacity of the labour inspectorate to promote and enforce OSH laws, with particular attention to coconut plantations;
 - (4) Integrate workplace health promotion into the national OSH policy, and ensure the policies are aligned with health promotion initiatives (including on sector relevant issues such as alcohol and substance use, violence and harassment, nutrition and work-related stress);

²⁰ [ILO-OSH 2001](#) are Guidelines that call for coherent policies to protect workers from occupational hazards and risks while improving productivity. They present practical approaches and tools for assisting organizations, competent national institutions, employers, workers and other social partners in establishing, implementing and improving occupational safety and health management systems, with the aim of reducing work-related injuries, ill health, diseases, incidents and deaths.

- (5) Promote the development of occupational health services entrusted with essentially preventive functions and responsible for advising the employer, the workers and their representatives on OSH;
 - (6) Improve the system for recording and notification of occupational accidents and diseases to improve understanding of OSH issues and orient policy decisions;
 - (7) Mandate the provision of clean drinking water and toilets both on site and near work areas;
 - (8) Build its expertise and knowledge of specific OSH risks including chemical risks, biological risks and psychosocial risks to better identify and address these in the coconut sector and promote further research in the area, collaborating with organizations like the ILO, National Institute of OSH, and Plantation Institute of Management; and
 - (9) Encourage worker participation through tools, awareness raising and trainings, educating them on topics such as recognition of hazards, implementing safety protocols, preventative measures and use of PPE.
- Discrimination was not widely reported in the study, but responses related to highly gendered job roles, incidence of violence and harassment from and towards management, and the persistence of domestic violence in accommodation on plantation sites suggest that discrimination persists and that policies are needed to address these issues. To help eliminate discrimination in respect of employment and occupation in the coconut sector, the Government should:
- (1) Enshrine the principles of non-discrimination and equal remuneration for equal value in national employment law;
 - (2) Promote equality and non-discrimination policies at the employer level;
 - (3) Engage in and encourage social dialogue on issues relating to discrimination at both the national and enterprise levels;
 - (4) Implement awareness raising and education programmes on recognizing and preventing discrimination for both employers and workers;
 - (5) Strengthen enforcement mechanisms through working with the labour inspectorate or other independent bodies to conduct workplace inspections, investigate complaints of discriminations, and impose sanctions of violating parties;
 - (6) Improve monitoring and reporting through collecting and analysing data on employment trends, wage gaps, and complaints and incidences of discrimination; and
 - (7) Support victims of discrimination through redress mechanisms including legal assistance, counselling and compensatory schemes.

- ▶ Freedom of association and collective bargaining are not widely practiced in the coconut sector, with low unionization of workers, despite plantations unions covering the sector in principle. The Government should promote social dialogue in the sector through the effective realization of collective bargaining and freedom of association. While laws are in place to safeguard this FPRW, more can be done such as:
 - (1) Strengthening the existing legal framework to ensure the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining, including in national employment law;
 - (2) Strengthening social dialogue and workplace cooperation unit in the Department of Labour of the Ministry of Labour, in its capacities for the training of management and workers on social dialogue and workplace cooperation, with a particular focus on developing social dialogue mechanisms, guidelines etc. for the coconut sector;
 - (3) Supporting union formation in the sector, including through offering technical assistance and resources for the establishment of unions in the sector, across primary and secondary processing;
 - (4) Supporting the sustainability and development of representative organizations of employers and workers, including through programmes offering technical assistance and resources; and
 - (5) Providing training and capacity building to employers and workers to promote engagement in social dialogue, including through awareness raising programmes and tools.

Employers' organizations

- ▶ Employers' organizations in the coconut sector should:
 - (1) Contribute to the development and implementation in practice of the existing and revised employment law and national OSH policy and Programme;
 - (2) Provide training and capacity building to employers on OSH standards and practices;
 - (3) Advocate the integration of OSH into business strategies and help to ensure that OSH is considered a priority among their members;
 - (4) Engage in social dialogue and collaborate with social partners to promote and implement effective OSH management systems; and
 - (5) Adopt and implement anti-discrimination policies and promote diversity and inclusion, including through training and awareness programmes with their members.

Employers

- ▶ Employers in the coconut sector should make commitments to the principles of OSH and compliance with OSH regulations and show leadership in OSH at the organization level. Employers should make arrangements for effective OSH management systems, as per the National OSH policy. Employers should:
 - (1) Formulate a workplace level OSH policy, in consultation with workers and representatives;
 - (2) Establish, strengthen and ensure the efficient functioning of a safety and health committee with workers and their representatives and participate fully in bipartite committees;
 - (3) Implement OSH-related participatory methodologies such as Work improvement in Neighbourhood Development (WIND) and Work Improvement in Small Enterprises (WISE) to raise awareness, increase worker participation and break cultural barriers related to safety and health in the workplace;²¹
 - (4) Engage in continuous training and ensure that workers are well-informed about their rights, including the right to withdraw from work in the case of dangerous conditions;
 - (5) Make appropriate OSH arrangements to ensure safe and healthy workplaces for coconut sector workers;
 - (6) Make provisions for the safe use, operation, storage and transportation of chemical, physical and biological equipment, as relates to work in both coconut fields and factories;
 - (7) Provide for OSH competence and training, to ensure that all workers been trained and are competent to carry out the safety and health aspects of their duties and responsibilities;
 - (8) Implement appropriate documentation for the OSH management system and for OSH records (including on work-related injuries, ill health, diseases and incidents);
 - (9) Implement hazard prevention and control measures to eliminate risks, control risks/hazards, minimise risks and hazards that remain; and
 - (10) Provide personal protective equipment to the worker at no cost, as a last resort where hazards and risks cannot be controlled, train workers on their proper use and require workers to use them at all times when performing the tasks they are provided for.
- ▶ Employers should conduct awareness raising and training exercises with workers to understand their rights and responsibilities in relation to safety and health at work, discrimination and freedom of association and collective bargaining. They should support public awareness campaigns that help break cultural barriers,

²¹ See ILO, [Participatory Action-Oriented Training \(PAOT\)](#).

myths, and beliefs about safety and health practices in plantation communities. Awareness raising tools, guides, posters, flyers etc. may be disseminated to promote good practices.

- ▶ Employers should engage with workers in social dialogue at the national and enterprise level to negotiate working conditions, not only on minimum wages, but also on OSH, working contracts, hours of work, benefits etc. Negotiating policies with workers can help ensure the effective ownership of policies, including OSH management policies, build strong industrial relations and lead to improved productivity.
- ▶ Employers should invest in the improvement of work practices using technology, low-cost or no-cost improvements or through innovative work practices, where hazards or repetitive movements can be limited or contact with hazards minimized.

Trade unions

- ▶ Given that freedom of association and collective bargaining is weak in the coconut sector, the Government should prioritize the promotion and development of trade unions, and existing trade unions that work across plantations should focus on expanding their coverage of the coconut sector.
- ▶ Trade unions should:
 - (1) Contribute to the development and implementation of new labour laws and the national OSH policy and Programme;
 - (2) Educate themselves on issues relating to FPRW, including OSH, in order to better engage in workers' issues and participate in social dialogue;
 - (3) Conduct awareness raising and training initiatives to help promote workers understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Unions can play a key role in informing workers in the coconut sector on issues such as their responsibilities and rights regarding OSH, identifying and reporting discrimination at work, and about the benefits and practicalities of trade union membership;
 - (4) Engage in social dialogue with the government and employers to promote formal working contracts and permanent work for workers in the coconut sector; and
 - (5) Extend the coverage of existing collective bargaining agreements for better working conditions, including working hours, improved OSH and anti-discrimination practices.

Workers

- ▶ Workers should actively participate in workplace safety programmes and initiatives, including involving themselves in OSH committees and contributing to the development and implementation of safety policies and procedures.
- ▶ Workers should take responsibility for complying with OSH guidelines and actively participate in the activities of safety committees to address risks.

- ▶ Workers should understand reporting mechanisms and hazards, and promptly report any hazards, unsafe conditions, or incidents to their supervisors or safety officers.
- ▶ Workers should engage in training and education programmes to develop their understandings of workplace hazards, safe practices, and emergency procedures and commit themselves to overcoming myths and cultural barriers regarding workplace safety, particularly those related to protective gear, hygiene, and risk awareness.
- ▶ Workers should be informed of their rights to withdraw from dangerous work conditions and report safety concerns to employers or relevant authorities.
- ▶ Workers are responsible for the proper use and maintenance of PPE is crucial for personal safety, as per the OSH policy and their trainings.
- ▶ Workers should collaborate with their trade unions and participate on actions that relate to OSH, as well as other FPRW, and encourage them to enhance the role of unions in designing and implementing improvements to OSH management.
- ▶ Workers should collaborate with their trade unions on issues regarding FPRW, including encouraging them to ensure that unions play a role in OSH improvements, focusing on workers' safety and working conditions as well as on political agendas.

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