



International
Labour
Organization

**SAFETY
+ HEALTH
FOR ALL**



From the people of Japan

► Safety + Health for All Plantation Workers in South Asia

Major accomplishments



2021-2024

► Recurrent challenges for the safety and health of workers in the plantations sector

In South Asia, the plantations sector plays a vital role in the economy, providing livelihoods for millions and contributing significantly to export revenues. India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are key producers of tea, and other plantation crops such as cardamom, rubber and coconut. The structure of the sector varies across these countries, with large estates inherited from colonial times alongside a **growing number of smallholders**, now responsible for most of the production, often operating in the informal economy. As a result, the governance of the sector differs considerably across countries, regions and crops.

Despite these variations, plantation workers across South Asia face **common challenges**, particularly when it comes to ensuring their right to a safe and healthy working environment. In the field, workers are often exposed to hazardous conditions, including exposure to agrochemicals, challenging terrains, and extreme weather conditions, whether hot sun or heavy rain. Sanitation and drinking water facilities are often absent. Workers are also at

risk of snake bites, insect stings, and encounters with wildlife, including leopards and elephants. In factories, workers face additional hazards, including exposure to dust, extreme heat from kilns, noise, electrical hazards from exposed wires, and the physical strain of carrying heavy loads. They work with outdated machinery in often poorly managed workplaces with inadequate ergonomics. **50 to 80% of plantation workers are women** (depending on the crop and country), who face additional challenges such as harassment and discrimination.

Traditional management structures and the lack of effective social dialogue mechanisms further hinder improvements in occupational safety and health (OSH). Many workers are **unaware of their right to a safe and healthy working environment**, and labour inspections are insufficient due to practical or legal limitations. Wages remain low, and younger workers are increasingly leaving the sector in search of opportunities in urban areas, leaving the future of the industry uncertain.

Indian worker processing tea leaves.



► The ILO response

In response to the challenges faced by plantation workers, the ILO implemented the [Safety + Health for All Plantation Workers in South Asia](#) (2021-2024). The project, funded by the Government of Japan, is part of the ILO's global [Safety + Health for All](#) flagship programme.

To help foster a safer and healthier working environment in the plantation sector, the project focused on three key objectives:

- Generate and disseminate knowledge about the barriers and opportunities to improve the safety, health, and non-discrimination of workers in South Asia's plantation sector.
- Strengthen national and local institutions to more effectively promote and safeguard the safety and health of plantation workers in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.
- Develop or enhance workplace and industry-level practices and initiatives to promote the safety and well-being of workers within the plantation sector in these three countries.



Sri Lankan worker in coconut processing facility.

► Major Achievements

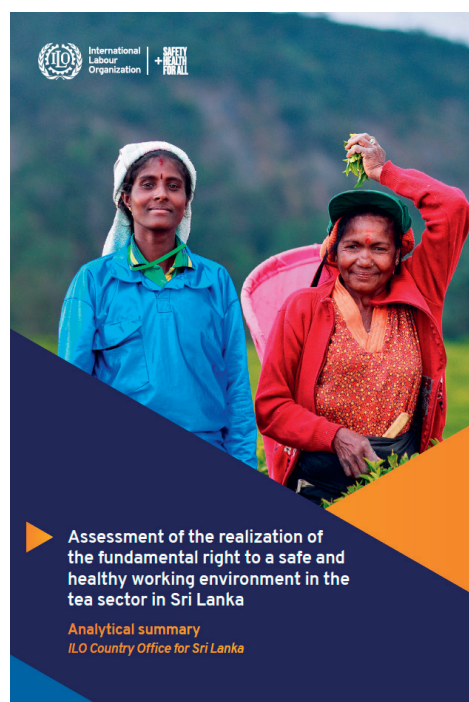
1 - Improved understanding and awareness of occupational safety and health across the sectors

The project developed and published **five diagnostic assessments** focusing on the realization of the fundamental right to a safe and healthy working environment, using a [methodology](#) developed by the ILO. Recognizing that the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work are interrelated, inseparable, and mutually reinforcing, the research also gathered data on the realization of freedom of association, the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, and the elimination of discrimination in employment and occupation. These assessments covered the tea and cardamom sectors in Nepal, as well as the tea, coconut, and rubber sectors in Sri Lanka.

To complement these assessments, the project also conducted a **study on pesticide** use in tea and vegetable farming in the municipality of Suryodaya, Nepal, and partnered with the Employers' Federation of Ceylon to conduct a **time-and-motion study** in the tea plantations of Sri Lanka.

This research enriched the evidence base on the sectors, shedding light on the challenging living and working conditions faced by workers, as well as the widespread lack of awareness regarding OSH issues across these industries. The findings from these studies offer practical guidance to governments, as well as employers' and workers' representatives on effective measures to improve working conditions and promote decent work in the sector.

To raise awareness of OSH issues across the region, the project also played a key role in establishing the South Asia Network of Young Trade Union OSH Volunteers. Additionally, a comprehensive manual was developed for this network to train trade union members and workers on OSH practices.



Overall, it is estimated that the project indirectly benefited up to

7 million workers

across India, Nepal and Sri Lanka

2 - Advancing policy and social dialogue

The project facilitated policy reforms at the national, state and municipal level through social dialogue. This included the establishment of **national level tripartite OSH platforms** in Sri Lanka and Nepal, which contributed to the development and validation of Nepal's first **National OSH Programme**. It is also anticipated that the newly formed government of Sri Lanka will endorse its revised OSH policy and Programme beginning of 2025.

In India, the project assisted the states of Assam and West Bengal in developing **state-level OSH profiles** and the development of an OSH programme for the State of Assam. Building on the momentum in these states, the project also supported the federal government's efforts to create a national OSH Action Plan for the tea sector, which is set to be rolled out throughout 2025. This initiative marks the first of its kind to be implemented in India.

In Nepal, an innovative step was the establishment of an **OSH committee at the municipal level** in Suryodaya, one of the major tea growing municipalities. This initiative together with the development of technical OSH guidelines for the same municipality strengthened the role of local governments in light of Nepal's recent federalization.

In 2022, the International Labour Conference recognized the right to a safe and healthy working environment as a fundamental right at work. In this context, the project also promoted the ratification of two fundamental OSH conventions n.155 and n.187. This was achieved through the conduct of a **legal gap analysis** of these two Conventions in Nepal, as well as supporting the development of a **joint trade union memorandum** urging the Government of India to ratify the newly adopted Fundamental OSH Conventions.

Last, the project also looked at tackling the key issue of work-related diseases with its support to the adoption of the first **National List of Occupational Diseases** in Nepal.

▶▶ The Tripartite OSH Committee has played a crucial role in developing the National OSH programme. It has fostered a shared understanding among employers, workers, and the government through regular meetings. Additionally, it has helped raise awareness about the importance of the tripartite OSH committee and programme at the national level, while emphasizing the responsibilities of employers.

Mr. Hari Paudel, Assistant Director, Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry

3 - Empowering institutions through capacity building

The initial assessments revealed a significant gap in the understanding and prioritization of OSH issues among institutions involved in the plantation sector at all levels. To address this, the project identified key institutional partners capable of driving change in the lives of workers in tea plantations and focused on building their capacity. This effort led to several key outputs.

At sectoral level, the project facilitated the development and integration of an OSH module into the regular curriculum of the Sri Lankan **National Institute of Plantation Management**, which trains estate managers nationwide. The **Plantation Human Development Trust** of Sri Lanka that aims to improve the lives of the plantation community also included OSH in its health services following project support.

At national level, the project partnered with **National OSH institutes in Nepal and Sri Lanka** and supported their capacity to deliver their mandate through staff trainings and development of new OSH modules. In Sri Lanka, the project also supported the **National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health** in establishing an AI-powered automated support system. This system provides easy access to vital OSH information, including references to relevant OSH laws, answers to common queries, compliance guidelines, and necessary documentation. In India, the project partnered with the **National Board for Workers' Education and Development** to build the capacity of development officers to support smallholders on OSH issues.

Last, to promote compliance with legislation, the project enhanced the skills of **labour inspectors** to conduct OSH inspections and accident investigations in plantations **across the three target countries**.



SriLankan Workers in a coconut processing facility

►► At work, we often neglected safety and health issues, but through the project, we've come to understand the risks and hazards in the tea gardens and factories. After assessing these challenges, we've worked together to improve our workplace environment. Some of the changes we've implemented include creating shaded areas in the garden, installing toilets, providing access to drinking water, and modifying the load-carrying system. We've also introduced safer plucking practices, such as using gloves, and adopted low-cost methods for improving safety. Additionally, we've established first aid provisions in the gardens, started keeping records of accidents and incidents related to OSH, and promoted organic production to reduce the harmful effects of pesticides. These changes have made our working conditions much safer and healthier for everyone involved.

Devi Kumari Rai, OSH Committee Member, Sundarpani Tea Cooperative, Nepal

4 - Leveraging the power of ground partners to drive workplace improvements

The project established strong partnerships with national and sectoral level employers' and workers' organizations to raise awareness and build the capacity of all stakeholders regarding the importance of ensuring a safe and healthy working environment in the plantations sector. The tripartite Plantation Human Development Trust of Sri Lanka and National Board for Workers Education and Development of India under the Ministries of labour also contributed to these efforts. In total, the project collaborated with **21 implementing partners** to achieve this objective. These partnerships entailed the development of technical guidelines, along with capacity-building and awareness-raising materials, which were used by implementing partners to disseminate knowledge and provide guidance to **550 workplaces**. A central element of these interventions was the establishment of **bipartite OSH committees**, which included workers' representatives in all targeted workplaces. While the structure of these committees varied based on the size and type of the workplace, their primary goal was to create a platform for effective communication, coordination, and collaboration between workers, their representatives, and employers. This was essential to ensuring safe working practices and promoting the physical and mental well-being of workers.

Gender issues were either integrated into the mandate of the OSH committees or addressed through the creation or strengthening of dedicated **gender committees**. The responsibilities of the OSH committees included providing information on OSH matters, conducting risk assessments, and contributing to decision-making processes, as well as implementing practical changes to improve workplace safety and health.

In total, these interventions reached **33,662 workers (including 17,209 women)** and resulted in about **1,742 improvements** across workplaces. The improvements varied, ranging from the upgrading of tools used to maintain machinery, to better storage practices for chemicals, the installation of toilets in the fields, and changes in work organization.

These interventions were further strengthened by partner-specific initiatives, which significantly expanded their reach. In Sri Lanka, a grassroots ratification campaign led by trade unions reached over **10,000 workers**, while a structured incident reporting platform was developed for two unions in the country.

In India, collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers' Association facilitated engagement with member organizations **across 10 tea-producing states**, promoting the adoption of safe and healthy work practices.

In Nepal, the Tea Cooperatives Federation (CTCF) and the Federation of Employers' Association (FNCCI) supported the creation of voluntary OSH guidelines for the tea sector, which were adopted at institutional level.



Nepal OSH committee members

Since the launch of the ILO project, OSH has gained significant traction. This year alone, there has been a 60% reduction in fatalities within the tea industry in Assam. ILO's ongoing initiatives and activities will continue to reduce workplace incidents, contributing to improved safety, health, and overall welfare.

Sanjoy Kishan, Minister of Welfare of Tea Tribes. Minister of Labour & Employment. Government of Assam

What is particularly important is that our efforts have empowered women farmers to take a leading role in driving these changes. They are not only more informed about safety and health but have also developed leadership skills in OSH, which is a crucial step toward long-term sustainable improvements

Rabin Rai, General Secretary, Tea Cooperatives Federation, Nepal



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