

# Work, life and Sri Lankan tea plantations: decent work indicators and outcomes

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article applies the International Labour Organisation’s decent work indicators to employment within four Sri Lankan tea plantations. It seeks to answer three principal research questions: (1) How effective are the decent work indicators in evaluating work and living conditions? (2) How might decent work indicators be revised to assist more effective evaluation? (3) How might they contribute to strategies for improved work and living conditions, within a more sustainable tea industry?

**Design/methodology/approach** – A multiple case study approach was adopted, including four tea plantation sites. Face-to-face interviews and discussions were conducted with workers and managers in each site, supplemented by follow-up interviews in one site.

**Findings** – Decent work deficits remain widespread, with much employment remaining poorly paid and unsafe, alongside severely inadequate facilities for residents. Sri Lankan tea plantation workers and residents, particularly women, continue to suffer the enduring colonial legacy of exclusion from the wider economy and society. Decent work indicators require adaptation for the distinctive Sri Lankan tea plantation setting, to enhance their potential strategic contributions.

**Originality/value** – This article applies decent work indicators to Sri Lankan tea plantations, drawing upon interviews with workers and managers. Its evaluation of decent work indicators leads on to strategic recommendations for tea plantations, in Sri Lanka and beyond.

**Keywords** Sri Lanka, Tea plantations, International labour organisation (ILO), Decent work indicators, Work and living conditions, Sustainable tea industry

**Paper type** Research article

## 1. Introduction

Launched in June 1999, the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda promotes “opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity” (ILO, 1999, p. 3; see Ghai, 2003). The Decent Work Agenda to improve quality of work comprises four Strategic Pillars: (1) international labour standards; (2) fundamental principles and rights at work; (3) full and productive employment and (4) social protection, social dialogue and government-union-business tripartism (Anker *et al.*, 2003). Key aspects of decent work are embedded in the targets proposed in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), within which improved work outcomes are viewed as a driver of sustainability (ILO, 2022, p. 1). In this article, we evaluate the indicators’ effectiveness in the distinctive setting of Sri Lankan tea plantations. The article examines how specific decent work indicators might contribute to improved work and life outcomes for workers and residents, within the historical plantation context of generational poverty and socio-economic exclusion. It then illustrates how they might inform strategy development, with the goal of achieving long-term improvements for plantation workers and residents, while enhancing the sustainability of Sri Lanka’s tea industry. The following literature review locates these issues within the context of Sri Lanka’s colonial and post-colonial history.



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## 2. Literature review

Following British colonisation of Ceylon (subsequently Sri Lanka) in 1796, the British East India Company developed tea plantations, displacing subsistence agriculture with a commercial, cash-crop economy. Despite Ceylon's formal independence in 1948, tea production remained controlled by private, British firms until nationalisation in 1972, when Ceylon became Sri Lanka. Several, more profitable estates have since been re-privatised ([Sri Lanka Export Development Board, 2020](#); [Wenzlhuemer, 2008](#)). Until recent years, Sri Lanka had been the fourth largest global tea exporter; by November 2024, though, it had slipped to seventh position ([CBSL, 2018](#); [Vivonta, 2024](#)).

Between 1830 and 1913, over 2.8 million South Indian, predominantly Tamil, indentured labourers were transported, to work in coffee, tea and rubber plantations. Native Sri Lankans and indigenous Tamils often regarded these indentured workers as “mere interlopers brought in by colonial masters” ([Ilyas, 2014](#), p. 186). This prejudice lingers today in the continuing socio-economic isolation of plantation workers and residents, a colonial legacy that has become entrenched within people's everyday lives. Most still live in housing “lines”, which consist of adjoining rooms in colonial barracks built for indentured labourers. Typically measuring around 6×4 m, these are often overcrowded, with limited access to basic facilities (see [Bozionelos et al., 2026](#)).

As a response to this situation, the Sri Lankan government established in 1992 the Plantation Human Development Trust (PHDT), a tripartite organisation comprising government, union and Regional Plantation Company (RPC) representation, with the goal of improving plantation work and living standards, thereby aligning with the Decent Work Agenda ([Rieck, 2024](#); [Ross et al., 1990](#); [van der Wal, 2008](#)). Consequently, there should be evidence of significant improvement in the situations of plantation workers and residents. This article evaluates the extent of any improvements, with reference to selected decent work indicators, drawing on the perceptions of workers and managers. The indicators can be engaged to measure the extent to which a specified objective has been achieved, enabling evaluation of the overall quality of work and living, while identifying decent work deficits.

The Decent Work Agenda has received extensive critical attention. While its potential to contribute to material improvements has been applauded by various commentators, the indicators' capacity to drive systemic change has been questioned ([Allen, 2021](#); [Brill, 2021](#); [Cooke et al., 2019](#); [Kissi and Herzig, 2020](#); [Monteith and Giesbert, 2017](#); [Standing, 2008](#); [Spooner and Waterman, 2015](#)). Evaluating quality of work through the application of indicators constitutes a notoriously difficult exercise, given huge international variations in pay and working conditions ([Leschke and Watt, 2014](#); [Monteith and Giesbert, 2017](#), pp. 818–819). Perceptions of quality of work can also vary according to numerous factors, including age, gender and personal expectations. These perceptions occupy a “subjective” dimension, in contradistinction to “objective” measures, such as numbers of employees or trade union membership ([ILO, 2013](#); [Nizami and Prasad, 2017](#)).

Sri Lankan plantation employment occupies a very different world from the “good work” identified by such organisations as the United Kingdom's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). The CIPD includes such criteria as being “fairly rewarded” or “provides opportunities to develop skills and a career and gives a sense of fulfilment” ([Brinkley, 2024](#), pp. 4–5). These criteria are generally more ambitious, within a very different context, than the decent work indicators when applied to plantations in various countries. The indicators' application is generally concerned with attaining more fundamental human and labour rights, since plantation work typically occupies a category of objectively “bad” jobs ([Findlay et al., 2017](#); [Shahadat and Uddin, 2022](#)).

Nonetheless, workers in apparently “bad” jobs can also express high levels of job satisfaction ([Blauner, 1964](#); [Gallie, 2007](#); [Gautie and Schmitt, 2009](#); [Holzer, 2015](#); [Kalleberg, 2011](#); [Osterman, 2013](#)). This is a particularly significant observation with respect to Sri Lankan tea plantations work. It indicates the possibility that plantation workers, as discussed below, may express satisfaction with elements of their apparently “bad” jobs, such as their

exercise of traditional, generationally transmitted skills. Therefore, the perspectives of both workers and managers should contribute this “subjective” dimension to the application of decent work indicators in plantations. Any objective/subjective, good/bad, dichotomous typology necessarily requires a healthy measure of enlightened scepticism and mediation when applied to any empirical situation (Cummins, 2000).

This caveat has been unmistakably relevant to the development of decent work indicators. They have been formulated through protracted political contestation, a perennial feature of the ILO’s tripartite, government–unions–employers structure (La Hovary, 2015). While in principle agreement on such goals as higher wages may be readily achievable, their operationalisation frequently raises fundamental conflicts. Hence the indicators have emerged through compromise, arising from conflict minimisation, as aspirational goals, rather than as quantifiable measures of progress (see, e.g. Anker *et al.*, 2003; Piasna *et al.*, 2020, pp. 3–4). The indicators, therefore, espouse universal values, including equality, fairness, social justice and human dignity, a universality that has attracted the criticism that they cannot readily be “tailored to specific societal contexts” (e.g. Cooke *et al.*, 2019, p. 122). This lack of specificity has discouraged inclusion in political programmes and policy development, while the indicators have attained limited impact beyond the ILO’s own networks (Novitz, 2020; Piasna *et al.*, 2020, p. 2; Leschke and Watt, 2014).

Moreover, the “inherent vagueness” of the term, “decent work”, has arguably contributed to the dilution of legally enforceable wages and working conditions (Standing, 2008), while the integration of the Decent Work Agenda within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development may have compounded this problem of insufficient clarity, further hindering practical application. As Novitz (2020, p. 463) observes, we “ignore at our peril” the emergence of “sustainable development” as “the new lingua franca of international policy making”, within which labour standards are in danger of being submerged. The SDG of decent work (SDG 8) is located within a growth agenda which confines the classification of productive work to wage labour (Rai *et al.*, 2019). The work of social reproduction, performed overwhelmingly by women in tea plantations, as illustrated below, is inherently devalued. The seductive message of sustainable development is undoubtedly less threatening to employers than the assertion of labour rights as human rights (Pogge and Sengupta, 2015). Yet the SDGs, like the decent work indicators, are also sites of political contestation, offering the potential to strengthen labour rights (Novitz, 2020).

This article’s domain of interest, within the broader literature, lies in the capacity of decent work indicators to evaluate and improve pay and working conditions in a major industry within a “developing” economy. The challenges of applying the decent work indicators became inescapable when implementing this article’s multiple case study approach, as detailed in the following section.

### 3. Methodology

A multiple case study approach, involving four tea estates, was adopted as it allows for an in-depth, context-sensitive examination of complex social and organisational phenomena within real-life contexts, particularly where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are diffuse (e.g. Yin, 2014, p. 16). This approach is appropriate for evaluating plantation work, which is deeply embedded in local contexts. The four case study estates are owned by three companies, with one company (host company 3) owning two estates. The case studies were directly comparable, selected to minimise variations (Seawright and Gerring, 2008), based on their organisational size (each more than 10,000 employees), similar organisational structures (including HR policies and union involvement) and region.

Fieldwork methods were developed from the research questions and a review of relevant literature. During late 2019, following university research ethics approval, one co-author conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 15 participants in each plantation, including field and factory workers, senior executives, supervisors and middle managers. Participants were recruited purposively, based on their respective levels of experience,

willingness and availability. The interviews (each approximately 60–90 min, with twenty questions) were held in Tamil, Sinhalese or English, according to each interviewee's preference. The interviews were recorded, then transcribed into English. All participants were de-identified, using pseudonyms, with all data to be stored securely in the university's research repository, for at least five years.

The field research data were then evaluated with reference to the selected decent work indicators. The application of these multiple indicators was designed to produce a comprehensive picture of plantation work and living, through which progress towards decent work and the effectiveness of the indicators could be evaluated. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in participants' experiences. Transcripts were read in full, coded line-by-line, then grouped into categories and subcategories. Themes related to employment quality were mapped to the decent work indicators, for evaluation. The following "Findings (a)" section summarises this evaluation.

Further field research was impossible for a significant period after 2019, due to pandemic travel restrictions, which had particularly severe impacts in Sri Lanka, amid the country's concurrent political-economic crises ([Adikaram and Naotunna, 2023](#); [Mehta, 2022](#)). Therefore, following the easing of restrictions, additional fieldwork was conducted by one co-author in one case study plantation during late 2023 and early 2024, to evaluate any changes during the intervening period. This additional research is summarised in a "Findings (b)" sub-section.

#### 4. Findings

In this section, the decent work indicators are applied to the case study data, to evaluate work and living conditions and the applicability of the indicators.

##### 4.1 Findings (a)

This sub-section details the findings from the research conducted during the immediate pre-pandemic period, with respect to each selected decent work indicator.

##### 4.2 Wages

The goal of this decent work dimension is for workers to achieve "a just share of the fruits of progress to all, and a minimum living wage to all employed and in need of such protection". There are eight statistical indicators, designed to "allow countries at all levels of development to monitor working poverty levels and trends". The legal indicator is each country's statutory minimum wage ([ILO, 2013](#), p. 67). Sri Lankan plantation workers' low wages have been a perennial focus of strikes, popular unrest and parliamentary debate for decades ([Gunasakera, 2023](#); [Mehta, 2022](#)). When the field research commenced in 2019, the statutory daily minimum wage for tea workers was 855 Sri Lankan rupees (LKR), equivalent to around US \$4.60. A government regulated increase occurs usually every two years. Despite substantial monetary increases since then, high rates of inflation have meant no increase in real wages ([DCS, 2023](#); [DailyFT, 2025](#)). The current government, however, has improved the minimum wage for plantation workers significantly, as noted later in this article.

Workers can also receive additional payments – for example, by performing overtime or exceeding targets. Worker and management interviewees all reported variations in wage rates between plantations, according to the required minimum weight of tea collected. A broad consensus emerged among workers that their wages fell short of a decent living income. A credible sign of this shortfall was men's performance of outside work, most commonly running three-wheelers (taxis), to supplement their plantation wages. Families often depended on these outside earnings to pay off short-term micro-loans, signalling for some a downward spiral of indebtedness.

Plantation workers' low wages are partially offset, to varying degrees, by company provision of non-wage benefits ([Ilyas, 2014](#)). Several managers were keen to assert these benefits when asked about workers' wages: "Outsiders do not know the other benefits and

facilities they get; for example, child development centres, diploma qualified child development officers and all the other facilities we provide. . . .” (assistant manager, male, field site 2). Both workers and managers also mentioned revenue sharing schemes; these could provide a further, albeit minor, source of additional income. Yet, despite the provision of such non-wage benefits, family incomes remain meagre, while poverty remains a constant threat. Overall, despite predictable differences between workers’ and managers’ perceptions, wages fell substantially short of decent work aspirations. The complexities of the plantation setting represent a challenge to any evaluation exercise, particularly in estimating the contested value of non-wage benefits.

#### 4.3 Employment opportunities

The “employment opportunities” dimension incorporates eleven statistical indicators and two legal framework indicators, focused on the goal of full employment, to be achieved through strategic training and education programmes (ILO, 2013). Training and education are seen, therefore, as the principal avenue to decent work and decent lives (Duffy *et al.*, 2022). However, observance of tradition in tea plantation work restricts these possibilities. The host companies’ commitment to product quality, viewed as integral to Sri Lanka’s international competitiveness, underpins adherence to traditional harvesting and processing methods. Worker respondents frequently endorsed these traditional methods, which include hand plucking, manual tea measurement and the use of 19th century processing machinery. Experienced field workers continue to pass on traditional skills, such as the art of selecting the most tender leaves, to the next generation.

Formal training and education facilities were available at all four research sites, while estate managements have taken measures to develop various training programmes. There was an evident generational increase in plantation provision of formal training and education, often explicitly designed to retain younger people. Yet plantations are not providing the employment opportunities to match this training and education, which remains less a precursor to decent work and lives and more a prelude to a life of indecent work and marginal living.

In recent years, greater geographical and employment mobility has enabled younger plantation residents to seek employment opportunities in Sri Lanka’s major cities, Colombo and Kandy. Young people are rejecting the colonial legacy through their departures, worsening chronic labour shortages and threatening plantations’ long-term sustainability. Several interviewees reflected, sometimes nostalgically, on this gradual opening of plantation life to the wider society. For example:

Those days of course, the estate workers were . . . confined to estates. They were not allowed to go outside the estates. . . . The younger generation, they have a different mindset. They think . . . “I don’t want to work in the estate”. (assistant manager, male, site 1)

In this regard, worker interviewees expressed deep concerns about their children’s futures. They were reluctant to see the next generation occupying the same jobs, although they responded more favourably to the possibility of their children remaining on the plantations, if more career-oriented employment was available.

Employment opportunities and the provision of training and education within the plantations requires contextualisation, with respect to four major factors: the historical exclusion of plantation workers and residents from mainstream Sri Lankan society; increasing labour shortages; the ambitions of many young people to leave the estates and the continuation of traditional work methods that require correspondingly traditional skills. The dynamic intersection of these factors is beyond the immediate scope of the decent work indicators. However, the insertion of the indicators within this context can assist in constructing an informed picture of how training and education might be matched more effectively to strategically planned employment possibilities. For instance, many workers possess traditional, highly job-specific skills that lack transferability into broader labour markets. Consequently, their employment prospects diminish with lengthening job tenure, their job

stability and security often leading to an employment dead-end. This distinctive factor should be taken into any evaluation of decent work in tea plantations, as discussed below.

#### 4.4 Working time

Manageable working time arrangements constitute a key element of the Decent Work Agenda. Excessive working time (classified by the ILO as more than 48 h per week – Singh, 2019), which worsens work–life balance and increases injury risk (Messenger, 2018), is an important indicator of decent work deficits. Numerous interviewees reported excessive working time, which they attributed to multiple causes, including labour shortages and management pressure on workers to meet stringent quantity and quality targets.

For male workers, who are concentrated in factories, overtime has become normalised. Employers have also devised various, *ad hoc* methods to meet ongoing labour demands:

Where male workers are concerned . . . we are short of male workers. Therefore, we give them contract work, agricultural work like training and forking, etc., and out of the budget we provide male workers contract work. (assistant manager, male, site 2)

This ongoing situation has intensified work–life imbalance, without strategically confronting the long-term issue of worker recruitment and retention – which could be addressed through improved intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Also, strategies to attract more women into those jobs perceived as “male” might alleviate labour shortages, while moderating a rigidly gendered division of labour.

#### 4.5 Combining work, family and personal life

The ILO’s “maternity leave” legal indicator requires women to have access to time off work, before and after childbirth, while its “parental leave” legal indicator refers to longer periods of leave for either or both parents (including adoptive parents) (ILO, 2013, p. 111). Workers articulated a diversity of perspectives on this issue, although the obstacles to attaining a sustainable work-life balance constituted an overarching theme. Women are often twice burdened, as employees and as family members, needing to accommodate competing demands, such as caring for young children and/or elderly relatives: a situation not, of course, confined to tea plantations (e.g. Beaujot and Liu, 2005). Women plantation workers are entitled to maternity leave of 82 days for the first and second births, with 32 days for any subsequent births. Free childcare crèches, with qualified personnel, are available for plantation workers’ children, aged from 3 months to 5 years.

There were definite signs of employer efforts to expand access to flexible working arrangements; for example: “We want to have flexible hours. . . . What we are now trying to do is to get away from that 8.30am to 4.30pm structure and introduce a flexible working system.” (estate manager, male, site 2) Some workers were able to leave early once their daily targets had been met, while others could leave to attend children’s school events or medical and dental appointments. A cautionary note, though: if these entitlements are accompanied by increasing incentives for male employees to work longer hours, the traditional gendered division of labour may become even further entrenched.

#### 4.6 Equal opportunity and treatment in work

This dimension comprises four statistical indicators: “occupational segregation by gender, female share of employment in senior and middle management, gender wage gap, share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector” (the final one obviously being inapplicable to the tea industry). The legal indicators are “equal opportunity and treatment” and “equal remuneration of men and women for work of equal value” (ILO, 2013, p. 153).

Tea plantation work is highly gendered: women pluck leaves, while men predominate in field supervision, weeding, spraying and factory work (CBSL, 2018, p. 107). There were

repeated comments from women workers (rejected by supervisors and managers) that plantation women worked longer and were paid less per hour than male workers. A lack of the most basic facilities exacerbates inequalities. For example:

There aren't any toilets in the field. We have to come down if we want to use the toilet or else go home. (tea plucker, female, site 2)

I worked for 9 months [during pregnancy]. In fact, I worked in the morning and went for the C-section in the evening. (tea plucker, female, site 3)

Women also reported undertaking duties (such as cleaning field rows and manual weeding) beyond their core responsibilities, while several interviewees reported flaws, inaccuracies and favouritism in recording quantities of tea plucked. There were, then, significant decent work deficits, extending to the denial of fundamental human rights, such as the right to safe childbirth (UNHRC/UNHCHR, 2025). The equal opportunity and treatment at work indicators require reconfiguring to apprehend such extreme gender oppressions.

#### 4.7 Stability and security of work

The decent work “stability and security” dimension assesses protection of workers against loss of income due to job loss and/or employment instability. The indicators for this dimension are “precarious employment rate, job tenure, subsistence worker rate and real earnings of casual workers”, in conjunction with the legal indicator of “termination of employment” (ILO, 2013, p. 140). The interview data revealed very few signs of the characteristics normally associated with precarious employment, such as regular job losses, casual employment and high turnover. There were only a few cases of individual dismissals, for specific reasons such as protracted inability to meet minimum production standards, while the average worker tenure in estate jobs was over ten years. Applicability of the legal indicator, “termination of employment, including notice of termination in weeks”, was extremely rare. Consequently, there was scarce evidence of the decent work deficit indicator of precarious employment, while the positive indicator of job tenure held true for a considerable majority of workers.

However, several plantation workers viewed such lengthy job tenure despairingly, in the absence of employment options. As mentioned above, there were indications that younger people may be breaking with this pattern, exacerbating employers' difficulties in attracting and retaining workers. Several worker interviewees also envisaged their children occupying better jobs, although not necessarily outside the plantation. Hence, many workers view stability and security as representing an absence of employment futures, especially for their children – a consistent theme throughout the interviews. Stability and security cannot, then, be understood without context. In Sri Lankan tea plantations, stability and security assume darker meanings than in many other locations.

#### 4.8 Safe working environment

The extent to which workers are protected from work-related hazards and risks is captured via four decent work statistical indicators: “occupational injury frequency rate (fatal), occupational injury frequency rate (non-fatal), time lost due to occupational injuries and labour inspection”. The legal indicators are “employment injury benefits and occupational safety and health (OSH) labour inspection” (ILO, 2013, pp. 154–155). The interviews revealed that plantation workers are vulnerable to numerous health hazards and occupational risks, including wasp attacks, leech bites, toxic chemicals, faulty machinery and falling trees. No overt workplace harassment or violence was reported in the interviews, although this does not prove their absence (Tuerkheimer, 2019).

Factory workers were exposed constantly to tea dust and machinery-generated, extreme heat, conditions that have often resulted in acute respiratory diseases and related ailments. In some sites, appropriate protective equipment was unavailable to workers, despite being a

mandatory requirement of the Rainforest Alliance (RFA) and International Standards Organisation (ISO) certifications held by all case study plantations. Health and safety provisions were often ignored in practice, unless a government inspector arrived. For example: “There is a lot of dust in the factory. We are supposed to wear masks and the masks are not provided regularly. If [an inspector] visits the factory, then they will provide masks.” (factory worker, female, site 3) This continuing problem indicates that voluntary programmes may not only have little impact but are also often associated with the perpetuation of indecent work (Donaghey *et al.*, 2014; Thomas, 2021).

Pressure from supervisors and managers to meet quantity and quality targets accelerated work intensification, often accompanied by neglect of worker safety, in the absence of official monitoring. Yet there was also some evidence of management adopting measures to remedy this situation, including: improved safety equipment and clothing; removing dangerous trees and supplying wasp nets and leech repellents to field workers. Overall, the decent work indicators are applicable, enabling identification of substantial decent work deficits. However, employers retain the ability to evade their formal health and safety responsibilities. These issues are addressed later in this article.

#### *4.9 Social dialogue, workers’ and employers’ representation*

Social dialogue comprises all types of negotiation, consultation and exchange of information between representatives of governments, employers and workers on issues of common interest. The ILO allocates a key role to social dialogue in achieving the objective of promoting opportunities to achieve decent work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. In keeping with the ILO’s tripartite heritage, unionisation is viewed as crucial to the attainment of decent work goals (ILO, 2013, pp. 190–192). The decent work statistical indicators are trade union and employer organisation density rates, collective bargaining coverage and days not worked due to strikes and lockouts. The legal indicators are freedom of association, collective bargaining rights and tripartite consultation.

The ILO is in regular communication with Sri Lanka’s Department of Labour and the Ministry of Labour and Trade Union Relations (Department of Labour, 2018). The wages and conditions of plantation workers are regulated formally by a collective agreement between the major trade unions (including Ceylon Workers’ Congress, Lanka Jathika Estate Workers’ Union and Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre) and the Employers’ Federation of Ceylon (Gunasekara, 2023).

The interview data revealed multiple trade unions on each site, with almost all workers belonging to at least one. Plantation unions exercise responsibilities considerably beyond representation of members in bargaining, disputes and workplace problems. Like employers, they have assumed a wider community role, extending to improvement of living conditions, housing and roads. Estate managers reported generally productive relationships with unions, with weekly union-management meetings being held, to consult on operational matters: “What’s the point in fighting? We must work together to find solutions.” (estate manager, male, field site 2)

Several interviewees reported that the PHDT, in partnership with various organisations, including unions, had implemented programmes in various areas: housing and infrastructure; water and sanitation; health and nutrition; child-care; housing cooperative societies; training and development; sport and welfare. Some families had also received new houses, supplied by the Indian Government, with support from estate management and local unions. Many, though, still lived in “line” accommodation; an assistant field site officer (male, site 4) described these living conditions:

We have just two rooms. We use one room as a bedroom and the other as the kitchen. We all sleep in the same room . . . and my children also study in that room. I would like to have a single unit for our family rather than living in line rooms.

The social dialogue, workers' and employers' representation indicators of decent work are highly relevant to the plantation context. High union membership and collective bargaining coverage underpin dialogue between government, employers and unions: a potential, tripartite basis for strategic implementation of decent work objectives. However, the presence of multiple, competing unions, often with different political party affiliations, may render a united worker voice deeply problematic, while Sri Lankan unions also remain heavily male dominated (Kahandagamage, 2025).

#### 4.10 Work that should be abolished

International Conventions and the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work require the abolition of certain types of work, including child labour (particularly hazardous child labour) and forced labour. With respect to the Decent Work Agenda, five statistical indicators are available to assess child labour and forced labour: "child labour rate, hazardous child labour rate, rate of worst forms of child labour (WFCL) other than hazardous work, forced labour rate and forced labour rate among returned migrants". These indicators are complemented by two legal indicators: "child labour and forced labour, including public policies to combat it" (ILO, 2013, pp. 112–116).

Interview data and secondary information were collected in relation to child labour and forced labour within each plantation. All managers asserted their compliance with national regulations on child labour and forced labour, while confirming their commitment to avoid suppliers who fail to fulfil their legal obligations. They also stated that supplier audits were conducted regularly, in compliance with legal obligations. No sightings or reports of child labour or forced labour emerged during the field research. Therefore, as far as could be observed, there was no evidence of "work that should be abolished", although the decent work indicators are undeniably valid in assessing observable conditions.

Considerable caution should be exercised here, however, as there is credible, contrary evidence of child labour and forced labour within plantations. Family poverty may mean that children drop out of school, with girls assuming childcare responsibilities, while boys occupy labouring jobs; a deeply gendered division of labour is inculcated in childhood (Bandaranayake *et al.*, 2023). Again, this demonstrates the need for appropriate socioeconomic contextualisation in the application of decent work indicators.

#### 4.11 Findings (b)

This brief section draws upon post-pandemic, group discussions conducted by one co-author, held during December 2023, with 40 field workers at one estate, followed by interviews (in March and May 2024 respectively) with one Health and Safety Officer and one Human Resources Manager (both women). These discussions and interviews informed a picture of the overall well-being of estate workers and residents during the post-2019 period, indicating the impacts of the global pandemic and Sri Lankan political-economic crises on attainment of decent work goals.

#### 4.12 Wages

According to workers, plantation life became even more challenging, as living standards deteriorated and prices became unaffordable. While monetary wages increased on average by approximately 20%, official annual inflation during the worst year, 2022, was 59.2% (DCS, 2023). In contrast, the HR Manager depicted a situation of worker ingratitude, previously encountered in the original interviews: "These workers can never be satisfied. . . . We worked around the clock to protect them from the pandemic and to make sure they weren't starving." This gulf between workers' and managers' perceptions encapsulates the obstacles to strategic dialogue intended to achieve decent work outcomes, as noted above.

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#### *4.13 Employment opportunities*

Workers, the OHS officer and HR manager all stated that training and education remained much as before. Children continued their school attendance mostly online, often in training rooms equipped with Internet facilities. Confirming previous evidence of increasing shortages of workers, the HR manager confirmed that the plantation had no expectation of future generations following their parents into manual work.

#### *4.14 Working time*

Working hours and the labour process remained largely unchanged, although the HR manager indicated that reduced tea weight requirements meant that field workers could choose between working fewer hours and earning more.

#### *4.15 Combining work, family and personal life*

Minor changes to provide more flexible work for plantation workers were reported, especially for those performing strenuous tasks, such as carrying baskets laden with tea leaves. There had been some enhanced maternity leave entitlements. However, workers were wary of parenthood, due to insufficient incomes.

#### *4.16 Equal opportunity and treatment in work*

The gendered division of labour in plantation work not only continued but intensified, with women workers seeking to organise their work commitments around childcare responsibilities, while men took on outside work of various types. Some field toilets had been provided – still complying with only the most minimal decent work requirements.

#### *4.17 Stability and security of work*

During the pandemic, stability and security of work became inextricable from maintenance of a safe working environment. Plantation management implemented rudimentary, but nonetheless effective, measures, with no worker fatalities attributed to COVID-19, although one resident died of the virus. Workers, the OHS Officer and the HR manager all stated that plantation operations continued, virtually as before, with no loss of jobs.

#### *4.18 Safe working environment*

Some improvements to worker safety had occurred, including the provision of ergonomic baskets.

#### *4.19 Social dialogue, workers' and employers' representation*

As in the "Wages" section, constructive social dialogue remained problematic, although both unions and management had advocated successfully for some new housing.

#### *4.20 Work that should be abolished*

As in the research conducted just before the pandemic's onset, there were no reports of child labour (although with the reservations noted above). Yet children's welfare had come under increasing threat, due to economic hardship, including malnutrition: the OHS Officer noted "a five per cent weight loss in most kids". This compounded plantation children's difficulties in school attendance and success.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this tea plantation during the global pandemic and concurrent crises was its resilience: the plantation's socioeconomic and geographical isolation worked to its advantage, with operations largely unaffected. Nonetheless, the respective responses of workers and managers continued timeworn themes, with workers lamenting their pay, work and living conditions, while managers decried workers' ingratitude. Despite minor

advances, decent working conditions for many plantation workers remain a distant prospect. While some factors (such as price inflation) are largely beyond the scope of tea plantation employers to address, others are well within their capacity to remedy. These are addressed in the following “Discussion” section.

## 5. Discussion: decent work, tea plantations and sustainability

This article has assessed the application of the ILO’s decent work indicators within a specific setting, Sri Lankan tea plantations, drawing on field research data from four sites. Despite their national economic contribution and potential to contribute to sustainable development, tea plantations continue to exhibit sizeable decent work deficits. Much plantation work remains arduous, poorly paid and frequently unsafe, lacking even the most basic requirements, such as toilets or protective equipment.

Clearly, more stringent regulatory enforcement, beyond occasional factory inspector visits, is required. This will demand extensive political mobilisation by workers, unions and sympathetic organisations, including the ILO. There have been some valuable campaigns in recent years, particularly by women-led unions, demanding more decent work (e.g. [DailyFT, 2023](#)), while the September 2024 Presidential election victory of the Left’s Anura Kumara Dissanayake has provided political momentum for legislative change, such as better resourced inspectorates, to improve plantation work and life (e.g. [Daniel, 2025](#)).

Tripartite dialogue, a key component of the Decent Work Agenda, might be expanded, to embed decent work goals strategically within everyday working life. Such strategic coordination might achieve a strengthened social wage (as with the improved housing initiatives discussed above) and more constructive, participatory workplace relations, with coherent matching of training and education to future employment needs and aspirations. The extent to which different unions are effectively articulating workers’ concerns may merit further scrutiny. Therefore, these indicators require refinement, to incorporate the effectiveness of unions from workers’ perspectives, particularly regarding competitive unionism and male union domination.

There are grounds for measured optimism in such areas as work-life balance and flexible working arrangements, with evidence of some advances, as with employer provision of professionally staffed childcare facilities. However, since women overwhelmingly retain the primary childcare responsibilities, men’s performance of additional paid work may compound the gendered division of labour, devaluing women’s unpaid work of social reproduction ([Ferguson, 2020](#)). Therefore, any gender equity indicators require inclusion of this unpaid, gender-based work, without which much wage labour would be impossible. The indicators should be able to apprehend these shifting relationships.

This stubbornly vicious cycle might be partially remedied by improving intrinsic and extrinsic rewards offered by plantation employers, to attract and retain workers, particularly younger people, amid worsening labour shortages ([Vivonta, 2024](#), pp. 1–3). New forms of employment encompassing sales, marketing and the creation of new, niche products, such as “boutique” teas, might enhance employee retention ([Selvaratnam et al., 2025](#)).

There are limits, though, to how far plantation work can become more attractive to future generations. An intractable paradox presents itself at the heart of tea plantation work. The retention of traditional manual labour is integral to the “quality” focus of Sri Lankan tea production, processing and marketing, as exemplified by a major company such as Dilmah ([De Silva, 2024](#)). This association is perpetuated through advertising images of smiling women workers, happily plucking leaves on scenic hillsides. Any moves towards mechanisation and automation, with accompanying job losses, would no doubt precipitate massive social and economic disruption, as has occurred internationally ([Mahinda et al., 2024](#); [Musambi, 2023](#)). For any foreseeable future, then, manual labour will remain central to Sri Lankan tea production, constraining progress towards decent work goals.

However, reduced hours working in the fields, with meaningful pay increases, should be priorities, alongside the urgent provision of essential facilities from the most basic, such as toilets and drinking water, to motorised transportation of tea leaves. Such improvements would go some way to the achievement of decent work outcomes. Task redesign (e.g. [Ranganathan, 2023](#)) and job rotation, with appropriate education, training and career paths that formally acknowledge the value of traditional skills, may mitigate this situation. Major tea companies, consistently profitable, even during recent crises (e.g. [Dilmah, 2022](#)), possess the financial resources to implement such improvements. Yet their “quality” branding remains severely unmatched by comparable quality of employment. Alignment of these dimensions of quality, through attainment of decent work goals, would enhance both workforce and industry sustainability. Practical modifications to the decent work indicators, detailed in the following “Recommendations” section, might contribute to this long-term sustainability.

## **6. Recommendations: the potential of quantifiable measures**

The decent work indicators can provide a convenient template for evaluating work and living within Sri Lankan tea plantations. Yet the concern raised by critics cited in this article’s introduction, that decent work indicators lacking quantitative criteria have limited capacity to achieve systemic change, becomes amplified in the plantation setting. Therefore, the decent work indicators might be augmented by further quantitative criteria, to be applied strategically (see, e.g. [Paauwe and Boon, 2018](#)). Examples might include the following, with respect to each decent work indicator examined in this article:

### *6.1 Wages*

The “wages” indicator might be expanded, to capture the value of employer-provided services, goods or land, including revenue sharing schemes. Quantification of these non-wage benefits might contribute to a more comprehensive picture of incomes, ending unproductive disputes over these non-wage benefits’ value (see, e.g. [Weathington, 2008](#)).

### *6.2 Employment opportunities*

Training and education might be matched strategically to the creation of new employment positions, especially for younger people, with a focus on the development of new products and markets ([Blanchard and Thacker, 2023](#)). New positions should be readily quantifiable.

### *6.3 Working time*

The enforcement of weight targets, in a form of piecework system ([Petersen et al., 2024](#)), can often lead to excessive working hours, with adverse physical and psychological health consequences. The replacement of this piecework system with regular hours, possibly supplemented by the incentive of increased revenue sharing, would provide a basis for quantifiable evaluation of progress towards decent working time.

### *6.4 Combining work, family and personal life*

There is significant evidence of progress towards work-life balance, as indicated above. These initiatives might be given further impetus through the strategic implementation of flexible working arrangements, open to all employees ([Harrop et al., 2026](#)). The introduction of such arrangements would be open to quantitative monitoring, evaluation and further implementation.

### *6.5 Equal opportunity and treatment in work*

There is evidence that the historically entrenched, gendered division of labour worsened during the pandemic. Quantitatively measurable strategies to address this problem might

include: recruitment and selection policies to achieve more equitable representation of women and men in factories, fields, supervisory and management positions; formal recognition in pay and career paths of women workers' informal skills (such as precise selection of the highest quality leaves); provision of suitable facilities (such as toilets) in fields and employer-provided childcare (see, e.g. [Chung and Van der Lippe, 2020](#)).

### 6.6 Stability and security of work

Job security and stability may signify for workers a sense of generational entrapment in arduous manual labour, thereby transforming this indicator's substantive meaning, which can be understood adequately only in relation to the lack of alternative employment opportunities ([Peltokorpi and Allen, 2024](#)). The decent work indicators require suitable contextualisation that stresses the importance of personally meaningful employment; existing decent work indicators (such as involuntary job loss) might be interpreted in relation to the quantifiable availability of alternative employment.

### 6.7 Safe working environment

The statistical measures already included in this decent work indicator (occupational injuries and labour inspection) might be complemented by: quantitative measurement of psychosocial risks, as indicated by days lost and absenteeism rates, and the incidence of bullying and harassment, revealed through safe, confidential reporting mechanisms ([Österman and Boström, 2022](#); [Yang et al., 2024](#)).

### 6.8 Social dialogue, workers' and employers' representation

Direct worker participation, for instance, joint worker-management consultative committees, might afford a quantifiable avenue towards resolving obstacles to strategic dialogue, such as competitive unionism and male dominance of unions.

### 6.9 Work that should be abolished

The "work that should be abolished" indicator potentially captures hidden instances of *indecent work* – most notably, child labour. Effective application of this indicator demands more research into exploitation of the powerless (e.g. [Magammana et al., 2026](#)). Quantification of "work that should be abolished" would be demonstrated through the instances of such work that are made visible and ended.

Strategic, integrated application of more quantitative measures may endow the term "decent" with greater substance and effectiveness. Such measures could also be augmented by quantitative, non-work indicators, such as the rate of replacement of "line" accommodation with new, modern housing, since working conditions are embedded within plantation living conditions. These future possibilities are explored in the article's "Conclusion".

## 7. Conclusion

This article concludes by returning to its three principal research questions: 1. How effective are the decent work indicators in evaluating work and living conditions? 2. How might decent work indicators be revised to assist more effective evaluation of work and living conditions? 3. How might they contribute to improved work and living conditions, within a more sustainable industry?

The limitations of the article are set by its subject, work in Sri Lankan tea plantations and by its focus, the application of decent work indicators. Further evaluation of the decent work indicators invites comparison with other industries and occupations beyond Sri Lankan tea plantations. Strategically coordinated, cross-national research, including multiple stakeholders, might foster alliances to achieve decent wages and living conditions ([Ford](#)

and Gillan, 2017). Such alliances should particularly include other nations that share similar colonial histories and experiences. Application of the decent work indicators might also be strengthened by integration with international, analytical frameworks, such as the European Union's Quality of Work (Dahl *et al.*, 2009; Davoine *et al.*, 2008), or the CIPD framework discussed previously in this article.

The long-term sustainability of Sri Lanka's tea industry is inextricably entwined with the sustainability of its plantation workforce. The application of decent work indicators, suitably modified with respect to socioeconomic, political and cultural factors, can inform serious analysis and strategies towards decent work and living in Sri Lankan tea plantations. Additional quantitative criteria, such as those detailed above, might assist the strategic implementation of decent work indicators. The material success of any evaluation system, though, is dependent on a supportive environment, particularly a comprehensive, legislative and regulatory framework, which the plantations lack (Thomas, 2021, pp. 19–20).

Yet promising recent government interventions, including substantial increases to the minimum wage, may presage more extensive reform. Removal of the far more than vestigial colonial prejudices and conditions (Roša *et al.*, 2025) remains a priority, although it demands radical transformation, beyond the immediate scope of any indicators. Ultimately, the achievement of decent work goals requires the extension of full, substantive citizenship rights in education, training and employment to plantation workers and residents – a wholesale modernisation of work and living conditions that may signal the end of the plantation system and its colonial legacy.

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