



Supply Chain Struggles

Abilities and inabilities to influence the conditions for Indian tea workers on a global market

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Supply Chain Struggles. Abilities and inabilities to influence the conditions for Indian tea workers on a global market

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trade, supply chain capitalism, civil society, accountability

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Abstract

The tea plantation structure in India where tea pickers both work and live on the plantations stems back to colonial times and has through the years been subject to much criticism. The criticism revolves around harsh working- and living conditions for plantation workers, and calls for improvements on a number of areas, such as housing and wages. This study focuses on possibilities for such improvements, and specifically on the perspectives of different actors connected to a supply chain of tea from India, including both supply chain actors (tea plantations, packers, buyers and certification schemes) and civil society actors (trade unions and an NGO). The aim is to better understand the pre-conditions for supply chain initiatives for sustainability by exploring these actors' views on how improvements on social conditions for workers in primary production can happen, and who is able and responsible for making it happen. The study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted both online and during field work in Tamil Nadu in India. The result is structured into following themes: 1) the actors view on the problem definition, 2) the actors view on their own role in improving for workers 3) the actors views on others' roles in improving for workers. The result shows that the actors all feel limited in their position to influence to any larger degree. The reasons they give for the limitations are many, the main ones expressed being the price pressing conditions of the global markets and the prevalence of corruption in governments, plantations, and trade unions. I draw on a framework of Supply chain capitalism to shed light on how the actors' stories, though vastly different, all fit together and are connected to mechanisms of global capitalism. The solutions suggested by the actors are diverse and they seem to have quite different perspectives on what is needed for development to happen in general. Such perspectives and assumptions could be relevant to consider when planning supply chain initiatives for sustainability involving different actors and stakeholders.

Keywords: tea workers, India, supply chain initiatives, social conditions, global trade, supply chain capitalism, civil society, accountability

Sammanfattning

Plantagestrukturen i tesektorn i Indien där arbetarna som plockare bor och lever hela sina liv på plantagen härstammar från kolonialtiden och har genom åren varit föremål för mycket kritik. Kritiken har kretsat kring hårda arbets- och levnadsvillkor för plantagearbetarna och förbättringar på en rad områden har efterfrågats, till exempel på arbetsbostäder och lönenivåer. Denna studie fokuserar på möjligheter till sådana förbättringar, med ett specifikt fokus på perspektiven hos olika aktörer kopplade till en leverantörskedja av te från Indien, inklusive både aktörer i leverantörskedjan (teplantager, packare, köpare och certifieringar) och aktörer från det civila samhället (fackföreningar och en ideell hjälporganisation). Syftet är att bättre förstå förutsättningarna för initiativ för sociala förbättringar i leverantörsled genom att utforska involverade aktörers syn på hur förbättringar av sociala villkor för arbetare i primärproduktion kan ske, och vem som kan och ansvarar för att det ska hända. Studien bygger på semistrukturerade intervjuer utförda både online och under fältarbete i Tamil Nadu i Indien. Resultatet är strukturerat i följande teman: 1) aktörernas syn på problemdefinitionen, 2) aktörernas syn på sin egen roll i att förbättra för tearbetare 3) aktörernas syn på andras roll i att förbättra för tearbetare. Resultatet visar att aktörerna alla känner sig begränsade i sin möjlighet att påverka i någon högre grad. Skälen de ger till begränsningarna är många, de främsta anledningarna som uttrycks är prispressande förhållandena på de globala marknaderna och förekomsten av korruption hos staten, plantageägare och fackföreningar. Jag använder ett ramverk kallat Supply chain capitalism för att belysa hur aktörernas berättelser, även om de är mycket olika, alla passar ihop och är kopplade till fenomen skapade av den global kapitalismen. De lösningar som aktörerna föreslår är mångsidiga och det är stor mångfald på uttrycken om vad som krävs för att utveckling ska ske i stort. Sådan diversitet i antaganden, åsikter och synsätt kan vara av vikt att ta hänsyn till i planeringen av initiativ för sociala förhållanden i leverantörsled där en rad olika aktörer är involverade.

Nyckelord: *tearbetare, Indien, sociala förhållanden, global handel, supply chain capitalism, civilsamhället, accountability*

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1. Introduction

The tea that I am drinking while writing these lines was grown on the slopes of the Nilgiri mountains in Southern India, and picked by hundreds of female hands, processed, and packed at various factories by both machinal and human hand and finally shipped to Sweden. It was then sold by one of Sweden's largest retail groups – Axfood – as a part of their private label in various stores in Sweden, ending up in my mug. The starting point for this thesis is this particular supply chain of tea, and the actors involved in it.

In 2018, Axfood had a hotspot analysis conducted on their supply chains by Oxfam International. The goal was to identify products and origins with substantial sales volumes and high risk of low wages. Tea from India was identified, with the risk of poverty wages and human rights violations. Apart from Axfood's analysis, there have been many violations reported on tea estates in India by various human right watchers as well as scholars. The plantation structure, where workers are both working and living on the estates and are dependent on the management to provide them their basic needs, are according to the reports lacking in many areas. The reports include violations on right to decent housing, schooling, clean water, safety and decent wages, to mention a few, keeping workers in poverty. (Gothoskar 2012; Ergon Associates 2023; THIRST 2023). As a result of the hotspot analysis and the human rights reporting, Axfood set a goal to reach living wages¹ until 2030 for workers in primary production of tea from India.

The starting point for this thesis is also that I, prior to writing theses and drinking tea, was employed at Dagab², the daughter company of Axfood responsible for the purchasing and logistics of all products sold. I was employed in the sustainability department and worked with the living wage goal up close and started to get a taste of the complexity working with social sustainability in mainstream markets.

¹ Definition by Global Living wage coalition: *“The remuneration received for a standard workweek by a worker in a particular place sufficient to afford a decent standard of living for the worker and her or his family. Elements of a decent standard of living include food, water, housing, education, health care, transportation, clothing, and other essential needs including provision for unexpected events.”*

² Further on in the thesis I will refer mainly to Axfood, but in doing so I include Dagab. Dagab should not be seen as a separate company, but rather as a function within Axfood working directly with the suppliers and products sold by Axfood.

Consumers and governments are at a growing extent demanding companies in mainstream markets to take responsibility for any human rights violation happening in the supply chains of the products they sell (Brinks et al. 2021). The Norwegian state is already requiring companies through their Transparency Act to report and monitor any risks for human rights violations in their supply chains, and at the very moment, the European Union are in the process of passing a new Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (Council of the EU 2023). The directive is suggested to require all companies in the EU with a net turnover over 150 million euro and over 500 employees³ be able to show that they have full knowledge about how the products they import are produced, and guarantee that they can detect and handle any human rights violations happening in their supply chains.

Axfood's supply chain of tea stretches across continents and includes several large companies, traders and producers, typical for a modern day's global supply chain (Langford 2019). Such supply chains would also be common for companies that are to be affected by a possible Sustainability Due Diligence directive. Any initiative or implementation will thus include and affect various stakeholders and actors. It is therefore useful to understand the nature of these interactions and how actors engaged with initiatives in the supply chains understand the possibilities to create change and influence the conditions for workers.

It is with this background this thesis takes off, with the goal to better understand the pre-conditions for supply chain initiatives on workers conditions by understanding the views of various actors involved in a supply chain. I aim to explore the views of supply chain- and civil society actors connected to each other in an existing global supply chain of Indian tea, specifically their views on challenges of social conditions in the tea sector and how improvements can be done. The study focuses on a global supply chain of tea, and the possibilities for actors to influence in such a chain, this despite the fact that the majority of tea grown in India is sold and consumed domestically (Langford 2019; Indian Trade Portal n.d.). The focus is relevant since it is through global supply chains that Swedish companies (such as Axfood) could have the possibility to influence conditions for tea workers.

The actors in this thesis consist of: Axfood, an Indian supplying and packaging company, two tea plantations, Rainforest Alliance India, Fairtrade India, 3 different trade unions active in the tea sector in India and one small Indian NGO working with tea workers.

³ Additionally, the law would affect companies in the EU with over 250 employees and global net turnover over EUR40 million, provided that 50 percent of turnover was generated in high impact sectors, eg. textiles, agriculture, forestry, and extraction of minerals (Council of the EU 2023).

1.1 Aim & research questions

This study focuses on changemaking in global supply chains of food in regard to social conditions for workers in primary production, with the main focus on a supply chain of tea from South India. The aim is to better understand the pre-conditions for supply chain initiatives for sustainability by exploring both supply chain- and civil society actors views on 1) how improvements on social conditions for workers in primary production can happen, 2) what the main limitations for improvements to happen are and 3) who is able and responsible for making improvements happen. The thesis aims to explore the actors' views in relation to a diversity of improvements of workers working- and living conditions, however, particular weight is placed on improvements in wage levels. The focus lies on mainstream markets, rather than niche markets.

Following research questions further refine the aim:

- What do actors connected to a supply chain of tea define as the most pressing social issue for tea workers in south India today?
- How do actors connected to a supply chain of tea define their own abilities and limitations to influence working and living conditions in general and wages in particular in primary production of tea?
- How do actors connected to a supply chain of tea define other actors' abilities to influence social conditions in general and wages in particular in primary production and on whom do they place the responsibility to drive change?
- How are the actors influenced in their abilities by the norms and structure of global trade?

2. Background

2.1 Brief history of Indian tea plantations and global trade

The tea industry is one of the oldest industries in India. The tea plantations in India were established by the British during the British colonial rule, with the main purpose to supply the UK with tea for domestic use and re-export (Gothoskar 2012; Mitra 2024). The cultivation was established in a plantation structure, where cultivation, harvest and processing happen in the same place, because a) it was the most effective way to use virgin land and construct all necessary infrastructure for large scale exportation and b) there is a high need for processing (black tea) of the raw material to be close to the farm (Hayami & Appukuttan Nair 2004). The plantations were, and are still today, situated in the rural areas of India (north and south states), often up in the mountains and far from cities and the rest of society. Because of remote areas of tea plantation, and the need for low wages to keep profits high, employment on the plantations has historically been family based, where males, females, and their children all work at the estate. Women have been predominantly working with tea plucking historically and are still the main labourers on the plantation fields.

Because of the tea industry's inherent export orientation from the colonial period, price fluctuations on the global market have always influenced the tea plantations greatly. To cope with fluctuations and to maintain profitability it was of high importance to keep the production cost, especially the labour costs, as low as possible. Many migrant workers were thus employed, often under slave-like conditions. Workers at the plantations during the colonial period had minimal rights and were cut off from the rest of Indian society, living and working at the estates, completely dependent on the plantation owner for their basic needs, workdays were long and death rates were high (Neilson & Pritchard 2010; Gothoskar 2012; Siegmann 2023).

Independence brought many changes for tea workers at the estates. The regulatory framework created in 1951 for the protection of workers' rights through the Plantation Labour Act was an important step forward (see more in chapter 2.5.1), meant to ensure by law that the workers are provided their basic needs. Different initiatives to improve workers conditions succeeded, for example, in abolishing child labour on the estates (Neilson & Pritchard 2010). Additionally, workers started unionizing after independence, which also sped up improvements (Neilson & Pritchard 2010; Siegmann 2023). Today union membership is still very common for both female and male tea pickers, however, there has been critiques through the years, and in some places protests, directed at the biggest trade unions for being male-dominated, and for operating in hierarchal and sexist manner (Siegmann 2023).

The tea industry boomed after independence, around 50s-80s and in late 80s, but in early 90s there were a collapse in the price of tea which led to a global crisis for the industry, forcing tea plantations to close and leaving workers unemployed (Raj 2022). The crisis also led to Indian tea plantation owners being able to argue for a freeze in minimum wages, and additionally implement incentive mechanism for workers that would encourage them to intensify their work to earn more. (Neilson & Pritchard 2010; Siegmann 2023). Raj (2022) argues that the crises followed the neoliberal adjustment on the global market that were on the rise in the same period, promoting less state-intervened trade and more unregulated free trade, including in the tea sector. Trade agreements that had before conditioned the tea trade were abolished and a few large corporations trading with tea began influencing the price-setting (Ibid).

The Indian government followed the global trends and from the 80s and forward they too began to progressively embrace market-oriented economic reforms. The trend increased in the early 1990s with the implementation of neo-liberal reform programs, signifying an era of substantial economic liberalization. The emphasis shifted from state intervention aimed at achieving more equitable distribution to a focus on liberalization, privatization, and globalization (Hari & Hatti 2015).

Although independence from the British colonial rule changed the conditions for tea workers and tea producers, retailers and brand name companies are continuously today holding an unproportionate share of the value of the tea trade (Siegmann 2023). As a result of liberalisation of the global market and the emergence of communication technologies, the majority of the global trade constitutes of supply chains that stretches across countries and continents. Buying firms are to a large extent outsourcing the production to suppliers and producers across the globe, often with traders and middle men acting as key actors in the chains (Langford 2019).

Approximately 80 percent of all global trade happens through supply chains led by transnational cooperations (Brinks et al. 2021). In the Indian tea industry this trend manifests for example in the fact that Hindustan Unilever and Tata Global Beverages together control around 51% of the market of packed tea in India (Langford 2019).

2.2 Brief history of sustainability initiatives

2.2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility

During the 90s consumers became increasingly aware of human rights violations happening in supply chains of global brands of clothing's. Reporting of harsh labour conditions in the supply chains of several famous brand led to boycotts of these brands. From the tumult of consumer pressure, a number of companies started to adopt and promote CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility, mainly through (voluntarily, non-binding) Codes of Conducts, where companies pledge to follow certain human rights standards and make sure they are followed in their supply chains. The emergence of CSR has been criticised for centring around brand reputation, while in reality making very little improvements for workers on the ground (Brinks et al. 2021).

A number of international guiding principles, functioning as “soft laws”, has been formed with the goal to guide companies into ethical business practices (Brinks et al. 2021). The *UN guiding principles on Business and Human rights*, and the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct* were created to guide companies in how to protect against, detect, mitigate, and remediate any human rights violations in the supply chains.

2.2.2 Certifications

As human rights issues and sustainability became more and more important for consumers, at least in the West, companies and private actors created a diverse set of sustainability initiatives to battle injustices and unethical business behaviours. Examples of these private initiatives are the various certification schemes that emerged during the early 2000s with the goal to engage stakeholders, such as companies, consumers, civil society and affected communities, and promote sustainable production through the use of market incentives (Brinks et al. 2021) Examples of well-known certifications are e.g., Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, RSPO, FSC etc The certifications generally compose of a standard of requirements

with which the certified companies must comply. Audits are carried out on the companies to ensure compliance with the standard, and products are sold with certain logos, to communicate to the consumers that the above has been done. As of 2018, the Rainforest Alliance has emerged as the globe's leading certifier of tea, having certified 19.9% of the world's tea supply (Langford 2019). For this thesis, Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade are the most central certifications, see chapter 2.6.5 and 2.6.6 for further descriptions.

2.3 Indian tea trade today

Today, India is the second largest producer of tea, after China, accounting for 25% of the global shares of production, and 12% of the export market shares (Tea board of India 2023). In terms of value, the top markets for Indian export of tea are United Arab Emirates, USA, Russia, Iran and the UK (Indian Trade Portal u.å.).

Tea production was established in India for export purposes, and as outlined above, exports are still an important part of the Indian tea production. However, since the 60's, because of new technologies, more availability of tea and market campaigns, the popularity of tea has been on the rise in India. Today a large share, approximately 80% of the tea produced in India, is today consumed domestically. (Langford 2019; Indian Trade Portal n.d.)

India, and especially South India, has been losing markets share in the last decades to several other tea producing countries due to a number of reasons, such as comparatively high production costs (Gunathilaka & Tularam 2016; Talukdar & Hazarika 2017; Tea board of India 2023). While Kenya is only contributing 9% of total production of tea globally, it is exceeding both India and China in its export shares of 24%. South India is losing competition to Kenya, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, whom are also plantation based, as well as to Assam in North India. China and Vietnam, where smallholder production is dominant, are also winning market shares.

2.4 Wages in Indian tea sector

India has had a rapid economic development in the last decade, resulting in an expanding middle class and overall poverty reduction. However, the growth has been unequal across sectors and regions, with a high growth in IT and related activities in the cities where people are well paid, while the agricultural sector is

lagging behind, leaving people who stays in the rural areas with low wages (Hari & Hatti 2015). Many scholars and human rights specialist agree that the wages earned on plantations in India today is below what is needed for a decent standard of living (Siegmann 2023).

The minimum wage for tea workers are set at state level in India through tripartite negotiations between planters associations, the state government and workers associations, and is set once every four years (Service 2021). The wages for workers at tea plantations in India is a somewhat complex system of a daily minimum wage rate, given that the worker fulfils their minimum quota of leaves, and a possibility to earn more if more leaves than the quota is picked. During peak season of harvest, intensive picking and picking on overtime will increase workers earnings substantially (Siegmann 2023).

2.5 Key actors and legislation

2.5.1 The Plantation Labour Act

In 1951 The Plantations Labour Act (PLA) was enacted by the central government of India to regulate and ensure the conditions for workers in the plantation sector, including tea, coffee, rubber, cinchona, Cocoa, Oil Palm and Cardamom. The plantations must adhere to the labour act if they are above 5 ha in size and has more than 15 employees, on any given day of the year (Tea board of India 2019).

The PLA includes rules and regulations on:

1. Health and Welfare, including housing, medical care, canteens, creches and schools etc.
2. Hours of Work, Rest Intervals etc.,
3. Employment of children / adolescents and
4. Annual leave with wages.

These obligations are monitored through the office of the Inspector of Plantations, who is required to ensure compliance via visiting each plantation once every four months (Neilson & Pritchard 2010).

2.5.2 The Tea Board of India

The Tea Board of India was created in 1954 and is responsible for the general development of the tea industry in India. The areas for which the tea board is responsible includes market promotion of Indian tea, increased productivity and

quality, supporting research on tea and looking over tea workers welfare (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India 2023). On the website the priority areas for research are listed and apart from research on quality improvement priorities are also on mechanization, product diversification, protection (against diseases), soil water management, and climate change mitigation (Tea board of India 2024).

2.5.3 United Planter's Association of South India

There are several plantations association relevant to the study area, the largest one is UPASI – United Plantation Association of Southern India. UPASI was created in 1893 and has persisted over the years. Its main purpose is to unite its members and work for their common interest (United Planter's Association of Southern India u.å.). The mission of the association according to their own website is to promote knowledge and undertake scientific research relating to the plantation industry, promote trade, commerce and aid development, unite the members for action for the common interest of the members and collect and circulate statistics and other useful information to the members and the public.

2.5.4 Auction Hall system

The tea auction serves as a method for manufacturers to sell their tea to a diverse group of buyers through competitive bidding, meant to ensure a fair determination of prices. Public tea auctions have consistently been instrumental as the primary avenue for marketing tea in India (Tea board of India u.å.). The auction halls are responsible for arranging and facilitating the auctions where buyers, sellers and broker who sell on behalf of producers, are participating. The tea is taken to warehouses, graded according to quality and then auctioned according to a decided schedule and the prices of the lots will be sold to the highest bidder.

Until 2001 it was mandatory for producers to sell 75% of their tea through the auction hall system. Today sellers are free to choose, however most of the tea is still sold through the auction halls. One advantage of the auction system is that the factories can sell their tea continuously and get paid within 2 weeks. This is important since the factories are not able themselves to keep stocks of tea and must therefore make room for the next harvest, which takes place continuously throughout the year. The auction hall system has been critiqued for pushing prices too much (Hazarika 2011). The small number of brokers who supplies to the

auctions are thought to cooperate with large buyers to keep the price low. They seller, who cannot hold on to the stocks, need to sell at the price offered them.

3. Litterature review

When reviewing previous research done in the field, I have searched broadly for studies on the tea-, and general agri-food industry related to sustainability, fair trade, supply chain collaborations on sustainability and stakeholders' roles and perspectives on themselves in regard to sustainability work. Previous research most relevant to this thesis is outlined below, and the research gap defined.

In summary, the body of literature is large, especially on supply chain- and multistakeholder collaborations on sustainability and how successful sustainability initiatives can be implemented. Many articles pinpoint the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in supply chains to implement successful and cost-effective social sustainable practices or sustainability initiatives (Brockhaus et al. 2012; Giménez & Tachizawa 2012; Govindan et al. 2021). However, we continue to need more literature on involved actors' perspectives on sustainability problems and solutions understand the possibilities for collaborations.

This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of conditions for supply chain sustainability initiatives, and I will focus on involved actors' perspectives of hinders and possibilities. Related to these topics, Govindan et al (2021) present a systematic review of existing literature on supply chain sustainability, and presents drivers, issues, barriers, and tensions in the implementation of social sustainable practices. Social sustainable practices are further defined in the article as "*...the well-being of human beings and society through the management of social resources; the alleviation of poverty, respecting justice, human rights, and employee welfare; and transparency of work*" (Ibid, 1). For my research, the barriers and tensions are the most interesting.

As barriers Govindan et al (2021) states that cost reductions, pressure from buyers on low prices and demand from consumers on cheap products, as well as lack of financial support or assistance from the government and/or industrial associations as a major aspect. Lack of top management commitment, lack of pressure from external stakeholders are also named, as well as lack of national and international laws and inefficient law enforcement which enable companies to act irresponsibly.

Bribery and corruption are also mentioned as barriers, as well as lack of awareness and training amongst the supply chain actors.

As for tensions, which is defined as a “*negative consequence which emerges from contradictory goals and interests among collaborating partners*” (Govindan et al. 2021), the findings show that the “*competitive demand between cost optimization and socio-environmental sustainability*” (ibid, 11) represents the major tension. The authors names it a financial tension between the supply chain actors when a business is forced to invest in social sustainability and at the same time offer products at the lowest possible cost.

Other tensions presented in the findings are the structural tensions that occurs when buyers try to control and monitor that the suppliers are following the sustainability requirements. Some buyers will rely on third party auditing, which may lead to confrontational relationships and sometimes psychological tension in the cases where there is mistrust between the supplier and buyers.

Several articles point to a research gap that this thesis attempts to contribute to. Govindan et al (2021) concludes in their review of tensions and barriers that future research should focus on understanding the roles of various stakeholders to mitigate the tensions mentioned in the article in relation to sustainability work in multi-tier supply chains. They also state that there is lack of attention on higher tiers and producers, especially in different cultural context and in “emerging economies”. According to Chen et al.'s (2017) extensive review on supply chain collaboration for sustainability show that the research available has been focused mainly on how supply chain collaboration can boost environmental sustainability and increase economic profit for companies, but little focus has been on social sustainability (ibid). Similarly, the main focus has been on supply chain actors from consumer to supplier, but not including other types of actors such as NGOs. Chen et al. (2017) also points out the need for a more diverse use of theory when discussion supply chain collaborations for sustainability development. Stakeholder theory, where a holistic view of the organization is promoted, and multi-stakeholder perspectives are prioritized, has been extensively used in analyses of supply chain collaborations for sustainability.

Existing research has, as outlined above, focused mainly on economic and environmental aspects of sustainability initiatives, on the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration and on general hinders and barriers in implementation of sustainability initiatives. More research including a variety of actors' perspectives on issues of social improvement in supply chains is needed. My in-depth focus on how stakeholders view their own and other roles in improving for the most

vulnerable in a supply chain will further help understand the starting point for sustainability initiatives and collaborations in agri-food supply chains. I will use the framework of Supply Chain Capitalism (see chapter 5) which will further contribute to the diversity of the field.

4. Methodological framework

4.1 Field visits and interviews

The material has been collected through interviews with actors involved in supply chains of Indian tea, including one Indian supplier and packaging company, 2 tea plantation owners, Rainforest Alliance India, Fair trade India, one NGO working with tea workers' rights and representatives from 3 trade unions. No interview has been conducted with representative from Axfood/Dagab, but their perspectives are included in the thesis. I have written about their perspectives from my experience as an employee at Dagab's sustainability department, and the sustainability manager has checked and approved the texts.

The contacts with the Indian supplier of Axfood and the tea plantations owners were obtained through the Swedish retailer and the contact with Rainforest Alliance, Fair Trade and the local NGO had partially also started during my employment there. Contacts with trade unions were made through a hired facilitator, an experienced Indian consultant who has been part of trade union movements for her whole career. One trade union representative is directly active in Tamil Nadu in the area of the tea plantations and the Indian supplier and packaging company, whereas the other two are active in the neighbouring state of Kerala. I chose to include them all as they are all active in different national trade unions and knowledgeable in general of the tea sector and southern India.

The main goal of the interviews was to map the actors' perspectives on the ability to influence social sustainability for tea workers, both their own and other's abilities. The interviews were semi-structured, a common method for qualitative studies, and were guided by pre-chosen topics, but also leaving space for the informant to discuss certain topics more deeply (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014) (See Appendix 1 for general interview guide used). The interviews were mainly held in person during my field research in Tamil Nadu and Kerala in India. I was able to do visits on the tea plantations and tea processing factories as well as the packaging factory. A few of the interviews were held online. All of the interviews were held in English and no translation was needed.

4.1.1 Online Interviews

India is a large country, and therefore some of the interviews with Indian actors had to be carried out via video calls as I was not able to visit them all. This was mainly done with the actors situated in northern India (Rainforest Alliance India, Fair trade India), but video calls were also held with the tea supplier and tea plantation owner before the field research. These calls were conducted as preparations for the visits in India where I could get a main understanding for the tea plantation owner and the supplier and prepare further questions for my visit.

4.2 Analysis of the material

Approximately half of the interviews were being recorded and fully transcribed. For the other half of the interviews and discussions this was not the case, either because the informant expressed a wish to only take notes and not record, or because the discussion was of an informal kind and having asked to have the discussion recorded would have disrupted the conversation. This was for examples conversations happening during lunchtime or during car travels. I sensed amongst the NGO and Trade Unions that the recording made them uncomfortable and self-aware and I believe not using a recorder helped the conversation.

The analysis of the material was made through thematic coding (Robson 2011), where different sections were given a colour and a theme according to the content. I sorted the themes for each interview into three bigger themes, picked in line with my research questions: “Problem definition”, “Views on the own role” (in influencing social sustainability) and “Views on other’s roles”. The analysis can be said to have followed the hermeneutic circle (George 2020). Through sorting and engaging with the material from each individual interview I gained a deeper understanding of the context as a whole, which in turned helped me understand the individual interview better.

4.3 Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations when conducting research is a very important part, especially in qualitative research where people’s opinions, experiences and beliefs are the data (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Before the interviews I made sure to receive consent and inform the interviewees of the purpose of the thesis, of how the

interview and eventual recording would be used, of their anonymity and of their right to withdraw their participation at any point.

As far as possible the informants and the companies and organisations they represent are anonymous in the study. Exceptions were made for the large, well-known certification bodies of Rainforest Alliance and Fair Trade as well as Axfood, apart from these three all the names mentioned are fictional. I decided to leave Axfood fully named because 1) my contacts at Axfood wished so and 2) since I must be transparent in the thesis with that I have and will continue to be employed at Axfood, it would be easy for anyone who wished to find out the company. The informants were all informed about their anonymity in the beginning of the interviews and received the information that they could decide to not participate at any given time.

I visited the packaging company and the tea plantations both as a representative for Axfood and as a student. I was travelling with a buyer at Axfood and was during the visit having discussions and doing inspections for the sake of Axfood. This required me to be very clear with my intentions for every visit and discussion held. The interviews for the thesis were held completely separately before the visits in my role as representative of Axfood, and I made sure my informants understood the terms of the interview and how I would use the data. My role at the Swedish retail company may have influenced some of the answers I got, this is discussed further below.

4.4 Researchers Role and Reflexivity

It was evident to me even before starting the study that I had certain advantages and disadvantages because of my position and background as an employee of Axfood. The positive aspects are to start with, that I have been able to get contacts with a complete, existing supply chain, and they have been willing to participate in the thesis because of the familiarity of Axfood. I have also had a large advantage in my pre-understanding of the retailer company's abilities and restrictions.

Negative sides of my employment are primarily related to my non-neutral position. The supplier and tea producers might have felt obliged to do as I wish for fear of losing business possibilities. Although I was clear on the objectives with the thesis there may also have been incitement because of the same fear to only show a positive side of their work with social sustainability and avoid talking about challenges. In the interviews I highlighted that although having worked at Axfood

the interview was not an evaluation of them as business partners and that they should see me as a student and researcher.

Reflexivity is also about understanding that you as a researcher are part of the process of research and acknowledging that your own experiences and assumptions will influence the process (Creswell & Creswell 2018). My previous engagements at Axfood/Dagab have given experiences that both helps my understanding of the material, but also influences how I read the actors and interpret my material. I have tried my best to let my previous knowledge guide me in the research process, but at the same time critically question the interpretations I make.

4.5 Presentation of the actors

4.5.1 Axfood - Retailer Company, Sweden

Axfood is one of the largest on the Swedish market, supplying foodstuff to several popular mainstream chains across the country. Axfood supply both brands and private brands to the stores, the supply chain explored in this thesis supplies their private brand. Private brand are brands owned by Axfood and the products under those brands are developed for Axfood specifically, while brands are owned by other companies and are only distributed and sold in Axfoods' stores. The tea for Axfoods private brand is Rainforest Alliance certified, bought through Ananya Sankalp, who in turn sources the tea from Tamil Nadu in India. Ananya Sankalp has been the supplier of tea for Axfood for many years. There are however regularly tenders and price negotiations where other suppliers are invited to participate and could win future contracts. I have been employed at Dagab, which is a company owned by Axfood managing and controlling all purchases and business relations with suppliers of the products sold by Axfood. In this thesis I will refer to Axfood, which includes Dagab and their operations.

4.5.2 Ananya Sankalp Enterprises – Blending and Packaging company, India

The blending and packaging company buys tea from all over India to sell both domestically and in exports to the US, Europe, Asia and Africa. They have several factories in India where they taste, blend and package the tea. The factory distributing for exports to Europe is based in Coimbatore. The vast majority of the tea bought is bought through auction halls and not directly from the tea plantations.

The two plantations presented below are the plantations supplying to Axfood. The interview was held with the general quality manager on the factory in Coimbatore.

4.5.3 Grandeur Leaf Garden - Tea plantation, Tamil Nadu

Grandeur Leaf Garden is situated a few hours from Coimbatore, in the Nilgiri district. It is 5 km from a town of approximately 50 000 habitants. It is connected to two other smaller plantations under the same owner, and the lead from these plantations is sent to the factory at Grandeur Leaf. The estate is Rainforest Alliance certified. It has approximately 800 workers in tea plucking, and 70 working in the tea processing factory located on the plantation. The plantation is providing housing to the workers, with the dormitories being spread out on the estate and nearby villages. The workers earn minimum wage, both in tea plucking and in the factory. The interview was held with the plantation manager.

4.5.4 Verdantia Estate - Tea plantation, Tamil Nadu

Verdantia Estate is situated in Tamil Nadu, 5 hours away by car from Coimbatore, close the border of Kerala. The area is remote with only small villages surrounding the estate. The estate is Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade certified, although the volumes Fairtrade certified they sell are very small. There are approximately 1000 workers, of which about 100 is working in the factory and the rest in plucking. The plantation is providing housing, medical care and a creche for children before school age. The workers are earning minimum wage. The tea plantation is owned by a larger corporate group managing several plantations around India, and this group is in turn are part of a conglomerate with an annual turnover of around 9 billion dollars, doing business in agri-solution, financial services and engineering. The interview was held with the plantation manager of Verdantia and a person handling sales and marketing at a national level.

4.5.5 Rainforest Alliance India

Rainforest Alliance is one of the largest sustainability certifications schemes globally and is especially dominant in tea. Their main objectives have been to fight deforestation, loss of biodiversity and climate change, but are also aiming at improving livelihoods and protect human rights (Rainforest Alliance n.d.). They are registered in the UK as an NGO but operates globally. Producers and companies obtain the Rainforest Alliance certification by undergoing audits by a third-party auditing company according to the Rainforest Alliance standard. The interview was held with a market manager employed at Rainforest Alliance, handling the contact with companies buying and sourcing Rainforest Alliance certified products from India.

4.5.6 Fairtrade India

The fairtrade certification has been primarily focused on the social aspects for farmers and producers, ensuring fair working conditions and wages (Fairtrade Sverige n.d.). One important aspect of the certification is that the producer and its employees, or producer cooperative, gets an additional monetary premium from the products sold with the certification. The premium can be used for poverty-reducing initiatives democratically decided by the people involved in the production (producer and employees, or producers in a cooperative). The interview was held with an employee at Fairtrade India, responsible for the global sales of Fairtrade certified tea.

4.5.7 Prerna Trust – NGO, Tamil Nadu

Prerna Trust is an NGO based in Coimbatore with approximately 30 employees. In Coimbatore their work focuses on textile workers rights, but they have two small offices in the Nilgiri area and Valparai close to the tea estates with 3 workers in total focusing on tea workers' rights and the situation for children and youths of tea workers.

4.5.8 Trade Union 1, Tamil Nadu

I met with one of the regional leaders of a national trade union active in Tamil Nadu, including the area of the tea plantations. The total members of the trade union nationally are about 34 million people. The interviews were held continuously during a one-day trip to several of the tea plantations where I also got to meet local area representatives and trade union committee members. I will in the thesis refer to them as TU1.

4.5.9 Trade Union 2, Kerala

Trade union 2 is a national trade union with about 6 million members in total, working across all types of sectors. I met with several of the regional representatives of Kerala at their head office in Kochi. Present was a staff working specifically with tea estate issues. I will in the thesis refer to them as TU2.

4.5.10 Meera Kapoor - Trade Union Activist and Lawyer, Kerala

Meera Kapoor is in her 60s and has been working as a lawyer and trade union activist for her entire life. She has been active in a quite high position in a socialist trade union in Kerala and is knowledgeable about workers' rights and struggles

across several sectors. I met her for an interview with a few of her friends who have also been active in the same trade union.

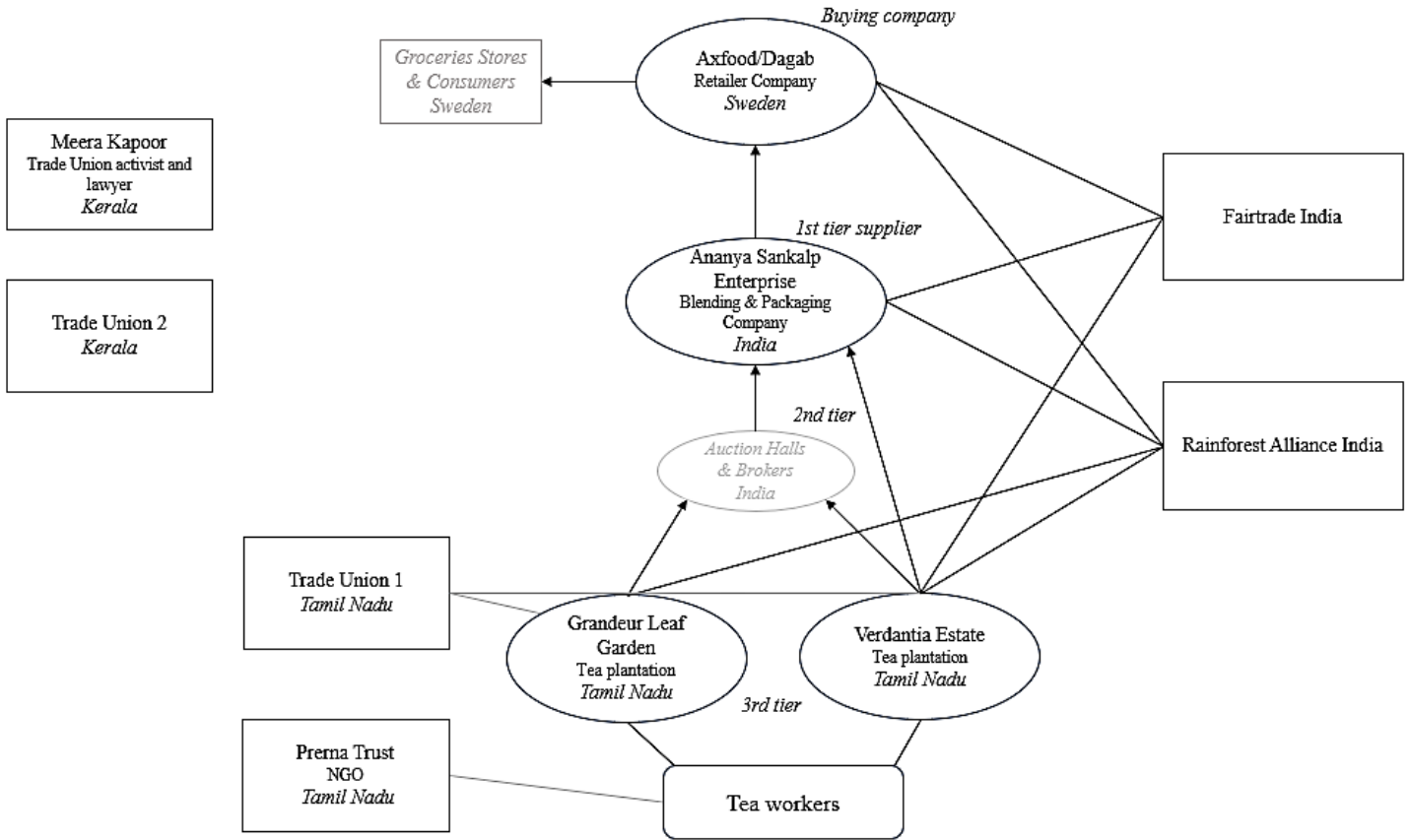


Figure 1 Illustration of the connections between the actors, the arrows show the direction of trade of tea, and the arrows and links represents contact and communication. The grey links represents probable contact and communication (eg, TU1 has contact with the majority of the plantations in the area, however I did not ask specifically about the plantations in the study, to keep them anonymous).

5. Analytical framework

5.1 Space for Action

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory posits that individuals both shape and are shaped by social structures, and that there is an interplay between human agency (actions) and structures (Inglis 2012). A person can influence their surroundings through action, but the actions and their ability to act are also limited by the surroundings.

Although this thesis makes no in-depth use of Giddens' theory of structuration, I want to highlight that I use the concept *space for action*, inspired by Giddens, as a starting point for understanding the actors' "abilities" and "hinders" to improve living conditions for workers. I use space for action as the ability to act, influenced by the surroundings of the actors in question – rules and laws as well as societal structures such as their own beliefs of limitations and abilities. In the discussion when I refer to the actors' space for action, I mean their perceived ability to act.

5.2 Supply Chain Capitalism

In my discussion I draw primarily on the framework of Supply chain capitalism from the edited book *Power, Participation, and Private Regulatory Initiatives: Human Rights Under Supply Chain Capitalism* by Brinks et al (2021) to further explain the views of my informants and their space for action, and how, though different, they fit together. Below I outline the main characteristics of the concept and how I will use it.

In the book the authors discuss the possibilities for improving human rights issues in modern day's supply chains through "private regulatory initiatives" (PRIs). PRIs are described as any initiative created by private actors with the goal of involving corporations, workers, and consumers in the implementation and, in some cases, the establishment, of human rights- and fair trade standards aimed at bringing

wellbeing and growth in the global south. Many times, they take the form of certification initiatives. To explain why these many sustainability initiatives have failed to bring long term economic growth to developing countries, the authors use the framework of *Supply chain capitalism*, originally brought forward in Tsing (2009) article *Supply chains and the human condition*. The framework explains the system in which global supply chains and engaged actors exist. Through introducing a framework that explains how global power dynamics, norms within supply chains and governance gaps works, the authors aim to outline how the global structures influences local actors' actions and interactions.

5.2.1 Accountability, norms and power

This label [Supply chain capitalism] refers not only to the fact that global production and distribution are increasingly organized through disaggregated, geographically dispersed supply chains but also to the ways in which lead, generally global, firms use outsourcing and subcontracting arrangements to minimize responsibility and accountability and to capture an unequal proportion of the value produced. (Brinks et al. 2021, s.3)

In one of the first chapters of the book, a co-author start by explaining how the lack of *accountability* is a key characteristic in modern days' supply chains (Nolan 2021). Accountability can be defined as when the conduct of an actor is made visible to a designated monitor, and the monitor then evaluates and sanctions them (Bovens 2007). A sanction is a means by which to punish or reward someone for their actions. Through the global outsourcing of production, which has led to complex, diversified and often time opaque supply chains stretching over countries and continents, the accountability for human rights violations has been fragmented. The authors argues that outsourcing and subcontracting historically has been a conscious strategy by large companies to avoid sanctions, and that this continues to characterize supply chains today.

One of the main explanations to why PRIs fail to bring lasting change is that they fail to address and challenge the inherent uneven distribution of value, surplus, and *power* among the actors in the global supply chains, in combination with the lack of accountability (Brinks et al. 2021). The power is concentrated downstream in the chain, and especially within large, global firms. Though power as a concept is not precisely defined by the authors, it is understood as having the upper hand in bargaining the conditions for trade and obtaining the large share of the profit. The *norms* of global trade, such as supplying contracts, multiple sourcing that enhances competitiveness, corporate Codes of conduct, are also all part of the dynamics that hinders lasting positive change and growth for firms, people and countries upstream

in the global supply chain. The norms and the power enable and are enabled by each other, meaning for example that lead firms in the global north can impose business norms because of their power, and the norms in turn creates unequal power dynamics.

According to the authors the conclusions of the above is, that 1) power relation and any systematic norms upholding inequalities in a supply chain must be questioned and disrupted and 2) the people (workers) in question for any human rights violations that are to be corrected need to be leading the change.

5.2.2 Access to markets and Governance Gaps

The power dynamics and the competitive conditions that are inherent in global supply chains have consequences for how supply actors will and can behave. Because of legal- and business practices used by buying companies (in the global north) the bargaining power of suppliers and producers (in the global south) have limited possibilities to influence the conditions on which they access export markets (Danielsen 2021). The access to global export markets is crucial for producers and suppliers in the higher tiers of the supply chains and they will behave in such a way that they keep accessing these markets. Consequently, firms in the global south will design their business, production, and labor practices according to the access to and leverage it gives them on the global market, always conscious of how other competing firms across the globe design their practices.

The authors describes some characteristics of supply chains where it is especially important with access to a global market, and where the bargaining power is particularly low. The chains can be divided into “*buyer-driven*” or “*producer-driven*” chains. This is mentioned by Brinks et al (2021), but further explained by Bair (2005) in her article *Global Capitalism and Commodity Chains: Looking Back, Going Forward*. Where producer-driven chains are supplying complex products, such as technology, the producer has bigger influence on the product and the conditions with which it is sold. The buyer-driven chains on the other hand are traditionally chains of food, clothes, and non-complex goods, where the buyer can choose between many different suppliers, switch easily and thus holds a lot of power, forcing the producers to compete with low prices. This affects especially firms selling to multiple chains, who need to please multiple buyers.

Supply chain capitalism describes how states and governments follow the similar logic as firms in their striving for access to markets. “*governance gaps*” (lack of rules and laws, lack of enforcement of existing rules, inefficient institutions, and judicial systems) enabling companies to continue with cost effective and unethical

business practices can be explained as a competitive strategy by weaker states who rely on production for export (Brinks et al. 2021). The fear of losing buyers and investors by reducing competitiveness to companies belonging to other states in the global south makes these weaker states hesitant to adopting higher standards that would mean higher costs for production (such as safety, labour rights, increased wages etc). The international legal system is described as only worsening the governance gaps, as they were created with influence from powerful states to create a legal environment that benefits corporate activity for these powerful states.

5.2.3 Global, but also Local dynamics

The framework of supply chain capitalism describes global phenomenon, but the authors also pinpoint the local interactions that the global system leads to. What may seem like a specific local phenomenon are often shaped by goods, people and capital that drives the “race to the bottom” in terms of competition. For example, local inequalities may be exploited by capitalist firms to keep the cost of production low. These inequalities are both products of supply chain capitalism, and drivers in the race for low prices.

The framework of supply chain capitalism points toward structural conditions of the global capitalist economy, broadly speaking. However, employing broad generalizations may pose a risk of disregarding the nuanced ways in which individuals perceive these dynamics and how it influences their space for action. I aim to use the broad descriptions of the framework but focus on the experiences of people of their opportunities and limitations for realizing change.

6. Results

To be able to present the result in an effective manner, I have divided the actors into 3 groups, and I present the findings from each of the groups. The groups were formed according to their function in relation to the supply chain of tea:

- Group 1 – *the direct supply chains actors*: Axfood, Ananya Sankalp, Grandeur Leaf, Verdantia
- Group 2 – *the certification schemes* – Rainforest Alliance India, Fairtrade India
- Group 3 – *the civil society actors* - The trade unions & the NGO

The findings are structured into three parts per group, each part answering a research question. First, I present the actors view on the main issues for tea workers today at the tea plantations. Second, their own role in solving and influencing these issues, and third, how they view other actors' responsibility and ability to act and influence. The findings has been summarized in a colour-coded table, I chose to put the table in the beginning of the result, for the readers benefit of being able to go back to look at it while reading the chapter.

	Axfood	Ananya Sankalp	Grandeur Leaf	Verdantia	Rainforest Alliance India	Fairtrade India	Trade union 1	Trade union 2	Meera Kapoor	Prerna Trust (NGO)
Problem definition	Broad human rights issues, wages central	Do not express	“Awareness” amongst workers	Remoteness of the plantation and the topography – sanitation issues, medical care	Low wages, some plantations have poor conditions	Low wages, profits for the plantation	Ambiguous, both stressing issues of housing, wages etc, and pinpointing that there were few/no complaints at the plantations visited	Medical care, H&S, wages etc	Medical care, H&S, wages etc. Awareness and illiteracy	Medical care, H&S, wages etc
Own role	Responsible to follow up human rights, in collaboration with suppliers. Not able to do much themselves, need certifications/collaborations	Not directly responsible.	Responsible to fulfil statutory laws (PLA), but not beyond that	Responsible to fulfil statutory laws (PLA), and to do what they can additionally through projects. Through FT premiums and the fund of the conglomerate owning the plantation, they are able to improve slowly	Certifications provide a platform on the market for demands for sustainable products to lead to a change. They are responsible for improving for workers and being producer centric	Unique in providing a premium payment. Can influence primarily as much as FT is sold, but also through collaborations such as Global Living Wage Coalition	Only big, function trade union in the area. Not using any though methods, no fighting, friends with the management	Big, important serious TU, fighting for the workers. Doing projects, sending in memorandums, complaints and so on to government and plantations	Only non-corrupt TU. However, they cannot influence more than keeping things from going backwards	Biggest NGO in the area working with tea workers, however, not doing a lot to influence their conditions, mainly working with youths’ and children’s’ future
Others’ roles	Joint collaborations	Buyers and consumers being able to choose the certification	Anything to increase the profit -Innovation, mechanisation	Innovation & mechanization. Certification schemes – to decrease burden on producers & influence consumer to buy <u>more</u> Auction halls need to be avoided	Consumers and buyers need to make the choice to buy more RFA Reaching the domestic market Joint collaborations, joint dialogues	Increased profit for tea plantation, more knowledge about certifications, also in the domestic market of India	Ambiguous, both critical of the plantation management, but also very positive. The survival of the industry is the priority. Government should remove taxes on <u>trading</u>	Plantations & government does not care about the workers, implementation of PLA is not done properly by most. More profit also needed. Government/Tea board of India need to promote export and do better on marketing	Government, big TUs and tea plantation managements are corrupt	Government is not doing enough; they should take the responsibility

Table 1 Summary of the actor’s perspectives. The colour coding of the table should be understood as follows:

- Problem definition: The darker the green, the more serious do they describe the tea workers situations.
- Own role: The darker the green the more do they stress their own role in influencing the workers conditions.
- Others’ roles’: Light green points towards market solutions (more profit to the plantations), darker green points towards other types of initiatives needed.

6.1 Supply Chain Actors

6.1.1 Problem Definition – from harsh allegations to vague descriptions

The problem definition of the tea workers conditions for Axfood stems from human rights reports and Oxfam hotspot analysis conducted on Axfood's own supply chain of tea. The content of these reports, already mentioned in the introduction, are that workers in India are subject to a number of human rights violations (poor living conditions, poor health and sanitation) and are overall vulnerable and prone to being stuck in poverty. The Oxfam hotspot analysis identified tea in India as a natural starting point for the living wage goal set by Axfood, and thus low wages (below living wage lines) are a key point in their views on the problems. Many of the other human rights issues could be mitigated if the workers earned more and the workers would not be as dependent on the plantations to provide for them.

During my visit to Ananya Sankalp Enterprise, the manager was keen to demonstrate the latest technology in their factory, showing us around the production line, but hesitant when it came to discussions on conditions upstream in the chain. When asking about the most stressing issues for tea plantation workers the answers were hesitant and vague. Even though the company have been engaged in the tea sector for over 75 years they could not account for the conditions for the workers at the plantations and referred to that they do not normally visit the plantations they buy from.

The plantation managers were vocal early in the interviews about general issues faced by tea industry, such as low tea prices, challenges in mechanization, the remoteness of the plantations, landslides due to heavy rainfall and labour shortage leading increased in-migration of north Indians to the plantations. We got to experience some of the challenges ourselves as we got stuck in hour-long queues due to landslides blocking the roads while travelling to Grandeur Leaf. Showing us around the plantations on winding, bumpy roads between the tea hills and plantation buildings in colonial style, the managements spoke about elephants and pumas roaming the areas. It felt like the plantations were small, wild bubbled preserved from the colonial era.



Figure 2 Picture taken at a round tour in the area where the plantations are situated (Klara Williander, 2023)

When specifically discussing the tea workers conditions the plantation managers, likely feeling that they needed to show me their best side, made sure to first and foremost point out that all workers were well taken care of. The manager of Grandeur Leaf were especially difficult to get through to and when asked for some examples of improvements that could be made for the workers specifically their only answer was:

See, mainly you need to create awareness, you know, the workers awareness and various issues, various topics You just need to create awareness.

When asked to specify: *“Generally anything for that matter, nothing in particular.”*

More information was not possible to get. Further into the discussion we spoke about trade unions, and I tried once again to ask for any possible example of issues in the past that had been solved by the trade unions and got the same answer as above.

See, usually we take care, we try to address all the issues, which comes directly between the management and the workers. Very rarely the trade unions intervene.

The representatives of Verdantia were more open and would both in online interviews and on visits agree with that there were room for improvements. They

spoke with enthusiasm about areas where improvements could be made, at the same time as reassuring me that they are fulfilling any statutory requirements by law and by the certifications they have. Their examples of social issues for the workers were however not those of a systematic nature as Axfood refers to, but rather problems inherent to rural life in India. The main issues brought up were with sanitation and hygiene especially for menstruating women, the lack of access to advanced medical care because of the remoteness, and issue with workers being tricked into taking loans from private loan givers with high interest and ending up in debt.

6.1.2 Their own roles – We do take care of our people

As mentioned in the above section, the tea plantation representatives were very clear that the tea workers welfare were taken care of by them, as required by the law. When asked if it would be interesting to participate in any social sustainability initiative (examples given of buyers investing in medical facilities or similar) Grandeur Leaf's manager were at first not positive.

See, we do we take care of our people, whether it's healthcare or living conditions. We take care of it.

Later in the interview, after discussions on the plantations struggles to meet market prices and make a profit, they clarified the conditions for them to be interested in projects on improvements.

See, improving the living conditions is good, there's no doubt, see but then we need to also get good prices for our tea.

In comparison, the Verdantia representatives would give several examples of how they were engaged in improving living and working standards for the tea pluckers.eg, giving out menstrual cups, and providing specific medical camps for treatments otherwise unavailable, like eyesight check-ups. The project with menstrual cups were initiated by their medical team, after being inspired by other actors, and the medical team had also been active in the implementation of the project as there are many stigmas around women's menstruation, especially in the rural areas of the tea plantations.

Verdantia is Fairtrade certified, and they spoke very positively about the impact it could have for the workers if they were able to sell more Fairtrade tea. They shared in a discussion over lunch during our visit some of the ideas they had for what the money from the Fairtrade premium could be used for, one of them being a fund

from which the workers could be able to get interest free loans, to solve the problems of workers getting into debt to private loan givers.

I asked if the plantations ever collaborate with each other. Neither the representatives of Verdantia nor Grandeur Leaf accounted for any deeper collaboration between the plantations. They are both part of UPASI (United Plantation Association of South India) where they share information on laws and regulations, innovations, and mechanization, but they do not discuss sustainability or social issues. Verdantia's manager express that although they are in "fierce competition" and thus does not collaborate, they do know very well of each other and keeps an eye on one another, since they are all in a "small sector" operating in the same area.



Figure 3 Picture from one of the tea plantations visited, living quarters for the tea workers being visible (Johan Axelsson, 2023)

Similarly to Grandeur Leaf's manager, the manager of Ananya Sankalp expressed that everything that was required by law is taken care of, anything required by the certification schemes are being fulfilled and anything beyond that is not necessary.

It was clear that Ananya Sankalp does not see themselves as a buyer as responsible for the social condition for the tea workers at the plantations.

“We are completely different sectors”, repeated the manager several times, regarding how they and the tea plantations relate to each other.

Ananya Sankalp is buying tea mainly through auction halls and the tea board (of India) and are only having direct contact with a few large estates that has been in the sector for a long time. Only for some specific organic tea will they have personal contact and buy directly from the estate. The contact and the influence they can have on any of the tea plantations they buy from is very limited. The way Ananya Sankalp’s manager express that they can influence is by buying more Fairtrade certified tea, but for this, there needs to be a demand from buyers sourcing from Ananya Sankalp.

As for Axfood’s view on their own role to influence for workers, we can find specific answers in their Code of Conduct, guiding their operations:

The Axfood group recognises our corporate social responsibility and our objective is to combine our business operations with social and environmental responsibility. The United Nations’ “Protect, Respect and Remedy” policy framework, as well as the accompanying guiding principles for companies and human rights (UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights), lays the foundation for the corporate responsibility. (Axfood 2023)

Axfood (through Dagab) communicates the requirements of the Code of Conduct (based on the UN human rights principles) to their suppliers and demands that they undertake to follow the Code. Axfood is a member of Amfori BSCIs (Business Social Compliance Initiative) and are through the membership committed to follow up on risks for human rights violations in their supply chains. This is usually done by demanding suppliers to provide social audit report, or other types of “proof, such as a collective bargaining agreement or a certification, for all entities in the supply chain.

6.1.3 The role of others – from collaboration to mechanization

Axfood expects that their suppliers sign and follow their Code of Conduct, in which it is required of them to inform and monitor their sub-suppliers to follow the code.

All companies that supply the Axfood companies with products or services, including wholesalers, retailers, commercial agents, and others, as well as direct producers and manufacturers (hereinafter the “Supplier”) shall comply with applicable requirements of the Code of Conduct. The Supplier shall ensure that its sub-suppliers, workers, consultants, and other contractors comply, in turn, with the requirements of the Code of Conduct.
(Axfood 2023)

Axfood is a member in several ethical business initiatives apart from the Amfori BSCI membership amongst them ETI Sverige⁴ and IDH⁵ steering committee for roadmap to Living wage. Collaborative dialogue and action are an important aspect of their work, and it is not uncommon that they take part in sustainability initiatives bringing the Swedish food retail sector together to discuss and tackle specific human rights issues. Axfood aims for the business relationships with their suppliers to be characterized by dialogue, transparency, and collaborations for continuous improvement.

In the specific case of tea, Axfood is only buying tea certified by Rainforest Alliance, and so they place responsibility on Rainforest Alliance certification scheme trust them to monitor and push for improvements for workers.

As outlined above, the packaging company places a lot of responsibility on the tea plantations to fulfil what is required by law, and for any higher standard it is the buyer’s responsibility to buy more certified tea. The tea plantation managers in their turn agree that the plantations are responsible for the workers well-being in general, but when we discussed higher wages and higher standards than that of the PLA, they were not as open to discuss. The price they get for tea, they explained, is too little to provide anything extra and they are barely making it today with the high labour costs. For any positive improvements for workers, there will first have to be more profits from the tea. This was pointed out continuously, especially by Grandeur Leaf’s manager.

Grandeur Leaf’s manager gave an example of a recent event where a group of tea plantations in the area went together and demanded a fixed price for tea, slightly above the current market price. They wished the government to interfere and set a fixed price for tea. The initiative failed and no guaranteed price were brought about. The belief that they government could do anything to improve the situation for tea plantations is quite low, they could promote exports, together with the Tea board of India, but that is about it.

⁴ Ethical Trading Initiative Sverige

⁵ Initiatief Duurzame Handel, which means Initiative for Sustainable trade in Dutch

No, you can expect the government to do something on this, mechanization, companies will have to, you know, develop harvesters, which are user friendly.

As above quotation shows, the hope for the future for Grandeur Leaf lies in mechanization and innovation. During the discussions they circled back to the global market and how the future lies in them being able to increase their profitability, either through mechanisation or through that conditions in other (African) countries changed in such a way that they compete at the same production costs as India, and the market price would be more beneficiary for the Indian producers.

The attitude towards the governments possibility to influence is shared by the representatives of Verdantia, who express that they think the government is doing what they can, being a government. Verdantia's manager is also looking towards mechanization and express that they need to earn more to be able to improve significantly for workers. They express a scepticism toward the system of trading with tea through the auction halls. *"The auction hall system will go, it won't last another 5 years"*, the manager says. They believe they will start selling more directly, and in this way they will be able to bargain for better prices, and not just take what price is given to them.

Verdantia's sales representative also brought up the roles of the certifications in the discussion, both as a catalysator for change and as an obstacle for producers and consumers who are drowning in the numbers of certifications.

That is becoming a real big challenge. For all of us. And basically, I mean, of course, we love to sell tea. That's our business. But when I go approach somebody, somebody tells me: Are you ethically sourced? Are you fair trade, are you Rainforest? Are you, what is it, regenerative organic, organic, you know, there's so many things. Okay, and at the end of the day, the buyer will say: Oh my God, you're not Elephant friendly."

Verdantia's representatives express that the tea sector will have to seriously consider new approaches to certifications in the future and how they can *"get this all into one house"*. A lot of money is wasted, in his opinion, on the work in getting every single certification, and they do not see this work being reflected in the price for which they sell the tea.

For the certifications to function and to be able to bring about change, there needs to be a higher awareness of what the certification means, both for buyers, traders and consumers.

Okay, I think a lot of efforts have been going around the globe including India but at the end of the day my mom or my aunt does not see the difference between... You know, one [tea] which would have been done sustainability. The efforts that are done on the farm, the farmer, the workers, the company, everything, it gets lost on the shelf, even though we do all of this work.”

6.2 Certification Schemes

6.2.1 Problem Definition – slow progress and setbacks

The representatives of both Fairtrade and Rainforest alliance express a high understanding for the precarious market situation that the plantations are in with low prices for tea. They recognise, however, a number of issues for workers at the plantations and highlight that the wages are a key issue. They are both leading members of the Global Living Wage Coalition and they are working strategically with setting long term goals of how to slowly bring the topic of living wage into the certifications.

Rainforest Alliance is in the process of developing a reporting system for wage levels and are trying to do benchmark studies of living wage levels in different Indian states, but they are facing a lot of challenges. The topic of wages has become a very sensitive one in India, and tea plantations are reluctant to even talk about the subject. The Rainforest Alliance representative explains:

So, it is not about paying it right now, but it is the benchmark and find out what is the difference and now what is your plan to go forward that and I'll be very open and honest here is that there is the living wage has become a big sensitive topic.

In my discussions with the plantations, they mentioned that the plantation sector in their area is a “small industry” and that they are all keeping an eye on each other in terms of production and development. The Rainforest alliance representative also referred to this closeness, as a factor keeping development in wage levels back.

If someone tries to start something new then there is always push back or something so, so very sensitive topic.

6.2.2 Their own roles – markets incentives for sustainability

The certification representatives described how the certifications facilitates improvements for workers with the market forces as drivers. Consumers and buyers can express their demand for improvements through buying more certified product,

and this demand will drive the change. Rainforest Alliance's representative explains:

I think certification is, my personal opinion, that why certification is relevant and why it probably works at this point of time is because it helps bring the market access. Because it is a huge driving force for bringing these changes. No matter how good you do at the ground and there is no market recognising it the change won't happen.

In addition to actively working for living wages, Rainforest alliance are also working with other specific projects, for example a project on smallholders and their traditional agricultural practices. They have goals and are setting more ambitious goals on reaching a large number of farmers and producers around the world. The Rainforest alliance representative makes a big point of their focus on producers and on being pragmatic on the ground:

We have to be producer centric to make the change because the root of all the impact and where it is happening is that the farmer level, at the producer level and we need to look at what exactly are their needs and how we can support them.

6.2.3 The role of others - The whole sector must come together

Rainforest alliance, as well as Fairtrade, are both working with raising awareness about the certifications, with the goal of selling more certified products. The Rainforest alliance representative expresses that there is still a lot to do in this area, for themselves but also for buyers and redistributors who are able to reach out with information to their customers, especially in the markets where certified food today is not mainstream.

I think the largest chunk of the role is also to create awareness in the Indian market because specifically in the case of tea 80% I think, now maybe 85% or 90%, approximately is consumed in domestic market and the large chunk is also certified⁶. So, I think it's an initiative to also kind of find the market for the certified teas because our producers put lot of efforts in getting

⁶ "The large chunk is also certified" means here that the large chunk of plantations selling to the domestic market are certified and could sell the tea as certified tea, but are choosing or has to sell the tea non-certified.

certified and putting all sustainable practices on the ground but because there is a very limited market. (Rainforest Alliance)

The Fairtrade employee also brought up the point of the lack of certifications on the domestic Indian market, and that it would be a possible gamechanger for sustainability initiatives and certifications, if awareness of such were to become common on the domestic market. They pointed out that although the domestic market is today focus on low price, low quality, non-certified tea, there is a unique potential in India.

So, there is a very robust domestic demand [in India], but in countries like Africa and all, they are dependent upon the external markets, the international markets.

When discussing more specifically about possibilities to handle the issue of low wages, the representatives of both Rainforest Alliance and of Fairtrade described the difficulties of combining the global market and the cost of implementing higher wages. The Fairtrade employee expressed that the producers as well as the certifications would struggle to be able to introduce any costly changes in the production. The complexity of tea supply chains, where the plantations are selling to many different buyers, and the buyers in turn prioritising differently, are creating problems.

So, for example, average production on an estate in India will be 800,000 kg to 1,000,000 kg. And I have seen that hardly 1% or 0.5% or 2% of the entire production is sold as Fairtrade tea. Now the challenge comes that if you impose a certain level of wage [for certified tea], then that is affecting the other 98% or 99% as well. (Fairtrade India)

The Rainforest alliance representative reflected similarly on how action from the whole sector will be needed to bring about any real change.

I mean begin from market side I also see that how do you bridge that [wage] gap? I mean, at the end, you know, the producer are incurring those fixed cost....but from the market side, markets are always pushing down south in terms of prices.

They continued.

I think that this needs little more collaborative dialogue between the industry actor etcetera how, you know, what is the pathway towards living wage? How

do we go to that point? Very practically I would say out of may be 100% of their basket of the buyers may be 20% are little more interested in say living wages, but what about remaining 80?

Worth noting, as the Rainforest Alliance representative calls for collaborative dialogues in the whole sector, the contact between the NGOs, trade unions and the certification schemes are inexistent at an organizational level. The trade union representatives at a regional level, as well as the NGO, had not even heard about the certifications Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade.

6.3 Civil Society Actors

6.3.1 Problem Definition - nothing has changed in 40 years

The civil society actors are, hardly surprising, the ones most explicit in their descriptions of the issues they see tea workers face at the tea plantation, although the severity of the issues described varies between them.

Meera Kapoor, the trade union activist and lawyer, paints a dark picture of the conditions at the estates. On the question if there are some examples of improvements and successes that has happened in the last decades the answer is “none”. Meera Kapoor and her two friends meeting me at the beach in Kerala had brought a master thesis written by one of them some 40 years ago at a university in Kochi, a statistical study of the conditions of tea plantation workers. The issues described in the study, old houses, poor sanitation, low wages, lack of medical care, are similar to the human rights report published recently, and Meera Kapoor explained to me that very little has improved since then and the problem remains.

“The laws are there” she said, referring to the PLA. *“Favourable laws are there, but they are not being executed”*.

The TU2 representatives and the NGO representative both describing similar issues as presented by Meera Kapoor, with medical care, housing, wages as problems faced by the tea workers, as well as wild animal attacks and landslides. The NGO representative continue to describe how the low wages, and the fact that the families only have money to send their eldest child to proper schooling, has created a common problem of workers taking loans with very high interest rates from private loan givers, ending up in debt.

The TU1 leader (Tamil Nadu) is the least critical of the tea workers conditions and although they to some extent also express a concern for the old houses, non-transparency and corruption from the tea plantation management side, they were constantly pinpointing how there were no complaints at the plantations they worked with.

On the questions of wages, the TU1 leader agreed at first with the others on that the minimum wage for tea workers isn't sufficient, but in further discussions of how wages could be increased they dismissed the question with a laughter and the comment: *"no one's salary is sufficient, right, you ask me I will say it's not sufficient, you ask him or him (pointing to other men with permanent positions in the trade unions in the room) they will also always ask for more"*. The TU leader then went on explaining how the management spend 440 rupees per worker each day each day, but then then also spend 800 rupees per day through the other facilities, such as housing and medical care, that the workers get.

One of the main issues the TU1 leader points out is the trend that was also mentioned by the supply chain actors - that the local people of Tamil Nadu don't want to continue working on the plantations and are making sure their children get into other sectors. This has created in in-migration of North Indians from poorer states who are seeking a better life. The migration has created an increase in temporary contracts, decreases the number of workers obtaining memberships in the unions and it also puts questions to the social security system, as the migrant workers are not entitled to the same social benefits (such as free rice from the government and free transportation for women and children).



Figure 4 Photo of one of the smaller towns in the area of the tea plantations (Klara Williander, 2023)

6.3.2 Their own roles - to fight or not to fight?

The two trade union actors, as well as the NGO, express their unique role in helping and influencing for the workers, but in quite different ways. Meera Kapoor, being the most critical and pessimistic actor, express a view where the trade union she is active in, is one of the few trade unions that actually sides with the workers. However, she expresses that the influence they can exercise is not enough to improve for tea workers, merely make sure things are kept at the same level and not allowing the managements to lower the standards.

TU2 representatives also, although not as dramatic, express TU2's own role as that of the most important trade union for the tea workers. They are actively working in many ways for the best interest of the tea workers and express that they are ready to fight for the workers' rights, at the same time as they also express that they are always working for the survival of the tea industry. They are for example running projects on health and safety on the plantations and they raise complaints on different platforms and with the managements and the governments.

TU1's leader describes TU1 as the only properly functioning Union in the area (Tamil Nadu). There are other unions, but they explain that they are not as well functioning in documentation, number of member subscriptions and the influential power. A key difference between the TU1 leader and TU2 representatives/Meera Kapoor is that they vocally express that they prioritize the survival of the industry and the relationships with the tea plantation managements. I heard from both TU2 representatives and the TU1 leader the expression "*Without workers, there is no industry, and without the industry there is no workers*", meaning that there has to be a balance where both workers and the industry thrive. However, TU1's leader went a little bit further and said explicitly: "*The industry is first, the worker is second*".

Where the other unions have mentioned striking and "fights" when talking about their work, the TU1 leader, and their local representatives, shakes their heads when I ask about their "fights" for the workers and says "*No, no, no fighting. No fighting*". They go on and explain how they always chose the "smooth" way with the managements, how this is the only way, and how the management trusts them because they know they will not go to strikes and they will "*always settle any issue*".

6.3.3 The role of others - corruption in all areas

The main takeaway from the discussion with Meera Kapoor is the conviction that the whole sector is corrupt, and that most of the problems the workers are facing stems from this. Government, Plantation management, TU and NGOs altogether. The government is not enforcing the PLA in a correct way, and not only because of lack of resources but also because they favour the plantation management and agrees to not interfere with them. The management does not follow the laws, and they are able to do so because of the lack of proper inspections and reprimands from government inspections. The same goes for the large trade unions, she describes that most of them are too "*in favour with the management*", and they agree to the management's line too quickly and does not fight for the workers in a proper way.

The NGO representatives mirrors this view of the government as responsible for the poor conditions. They give examples of how workers have reached out to the local authorities with suggestions for support they need and demand, such as the right to own the housing they are staying in at the plantations, help with medical scans for which they today have to travel far, but the process of simply getting a reply from the authorities is an inefficient and lengthy process. In their opinion, the

government needs to be more active, and it needs to provide the regulations needed for the workers to sustain themselves, in this case higher wages.

The plantation, the trade unions have nothing to do with the [wage] levels, this must be decided by the government. Then, if the plantations are struggling the government needs to support. The export gives foreign currency, so they [the government] can support.

When asking Meera Kapoor about the low profits on the estates, she responds that the intermediaries are a big problem and that they take most of the money. It is the same in all agricultural sectors, she says, the middlemen take a lot. She does not have much hope that any change would come with better times for tea on the global market, since the conditions have stayed the same throughout many decades.

The middlemen and the auction halls also get criticism from the TU2 representatives, as well as the job done by the government and the tea board of India. They criticize the inspections and enforcement of the PLA, which they say is not followed by the majority of the tea plantation, but they also highlight the need for the right conditions for the industry. *“You need a new mechanism. New mechanism for the purchasing and marketing.”* one of the representatives say, referring to systems of how tea is sold as well as the Tea board and the government’s efforts to support the industry.

The TU2 representatives explain how the issue of low profits at the tea plantation has to be solved in order to be able to improve conditions for the workers. They believe that the tea plantations need to earn more before conditions can be improved, however, they also describe a systematic issue of unwillingness from the managements side to prioritize workers, and this is where the trade unions come in.

Wherever the management is having more capacity to paying to the workers and providing facilities to the workers, and there if the unions are so strong, there the workers get more benefits... but you need both!

When the TU1 leader spoke about the plantation managements, they did it ambiguously, both expressing accusations of corruptions and low ambitions, and fondly descriptions of how they have such a good relationship and are always able to settle any issues they bring up with the management.

Apart from the governments inefficient inspections of the plantation, the legal system of courts, the labour court and high court, are inefficient. For a case to be

settled 10-15 years could pass by. TU1's leader explains how they are still waiting for a case they raised 10 years ago to be settled by the court.

The inefficient court system and the fact that the workers are too vulnerable to go on strikes, are reasons the TU1 leader gives for always settling things directly with the plantation management. "*Striking would mean death*" they explain and refers to how workers would not be able to eat after only a couple of weeks of striking. They give me the impression that they have chosen a path that Meera Kapoor would describe as "being in favour with the management", because the options of going on strike or to court is not realistic, leaving them with very limited options for exercising any disapproval.

The TU1 leader also believes that the profit needs to be increased for any positive change to happen for workers. In the spirit of globalization, their suggestion is that the government should interfere and "*...do what they have done in Bangladesh and also your countries (Europe) and have duty free trading. We cannot compete with Sri Lankan tea as it is now.*"

7. Discussion

In the result chapter I have outlined the supply chain (including certification schemes)- and civil society actors' views on the main issues for tea workers, their own role and ability in improving and other's roles and abilities. The discussion will have the following outline: First, I will discuss the actors' views on their own space for action using previous research and the framework of Supply Chain Capitalism (onwards SCC) to highlight how, although vastly different, my informants' perspectives fit together. I will also discuss how the framework of SCC argues, concerning what would be required for successful change to happen, with examples from the supply chain of tea. Second, I highlight some criticism of SCC and how my findings contradict the framework. Third, I continue by discussing the actors' views on who is responsible for driving change and how development generally could happen.

7.1 Supply chain capitalism and tea

7.1.1 The striving for access to markets

If we consider the supply chain- and civil society actors' descriptions of their own abilities to influence tea workers conditions, their space for action, the pictures we get are not of the brightest colors. Most of our informants describe how they one way or another are limited in their possibility to influence, and when discussing more fundamental changes such as increases in wages, it seems almost impossible to them.

Govindan et al (2021) writes in their systematic review (see more in chapter 3) about main barriers in implementing socially sustainable practices as cost reductions, pressure from buyers on low prices and demand from consumers on cheap products, as well as lack of financial support or assistance from the government and/or industrial associations. These barriers are represented in my findings, well described by both my supply chain informants as well as trade unions

and certification schemes. The supply chain actors in India constantly circles back to the low price for tea as a root problem for them not being able to invest in workers conditions. Even though there are other issues brought up by the civil society actors, they all largely agree on that the pressure on low prices is a main barrier: the profit from the tea business is too little to be used for eg, higher wages.

Supply chain capitalism highlights that producers and supplier, especially in buyer-driven supply chains, always are dependent on their access to markets. This need for access to markets will determine how they prioritize and act. When speaking to the Indian supply chain actors it is evident that the access to the global market, price-sensitive buyers, and their competitiveness in comparison to others are always on their mind. They constantly circle back to the cost of their production, and the performance of Kenyan, Ugandan and Sri Lankan tea production that outshines them due to lower costs of production. To do anything that would increase the cost of production and make the south Indian tea at an even worse position in relation to other tea producing states is not considered an option for any of our supply chain actors. The problem with modern supply chains and accountability also becomes evident here. The risk of losing business can always be used as an excuse for not improving conditions or wages, without the risk of any sanctions.

As the Fairtrade representative describes, to increase the workers' wages at any given plantation is seen as impossible, even if some buyers would be asking for it. The plantations individually sell to many buyers, and to increase wages for one buyer would mean a cut in access to the (price-sensitive) buyers not asking for certified products. This goes for certified plantations as well, who need to be able to sell their tea non-certified when necessary. Certification schemes, such as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance, aims to use the market forces to bring about change. At the same time, they are also "not able to", or at least hesitant to include requirements in their standards that would affect the whole plantation and thus the price of production for the tea that will be sold conventional.

Govindan et al (2021) speaks about the financial tension between the supply chain actors when a business is forced to invest in social sustainability and at the same time offer products at the lowest possible cost. Verdantia complains about all the work done by producers on attaining the certifications, of the pressure from buyers asking for all different types of certifications, and at the same time always pushing for the lowest possible price.

Additional example of this tension is the evident sensitivity mentioned by several of the actors (and experienced by myself) to even discuss the matter of wages and living wages in India tea sector. There seems to be a consensus amongst a variety

of actors (plantations, firms, the government, certification schemes, trade unions) that a rise in wages would mean the death to the Indian tea sector, and thus, it must be avoided.

7.1.2 Governance gaps

Govindan et al (2021) describes the lack of national and international laws and inefficient law enforcement which enable companies to act irresponsibly as important barriers. Bribery and corruption are also mentioned. This is brought up to a large extent by all civil society actors, and especially by Meera Kapoor and the NGO. The civil society actors discuss the government's inability and unwillingness to take responsibility as they should for the tea workers wellbeing. They accuse the government of being in favor with the plantation management and only caring about well-being of the industry, not enforcing the PLAs implementation though proper inspections, not giving out reprimands for those not following the PLA, and not listening to the workers when they ask for the state to intervene. The trade unions and NGOs paint a picture where improvements are limited by what in SCC is described as *governance gaps*, where the government and the institutions of society does or doesn't act in forming or imposing laws and regulations according to what is most favorable for the national industries. According to SCC this should be seen as forced strategies taken by states in weaker economies to make sure the producers belonging to that state are competitive at a global market. I argue that these "strategies" also include avoiding interventions that may not per se hinder, but neither benefit, the national industry.

When looking at how TU1 describe their Space for action we can see how these governance gaps impose limitations for them. The inefficient juridical system, that manifests itself in 10 years of waiting time for a single case, in combination with vulnerable workers for whom "striking would mean death" (TU1) has left the trade union with little alternative other than to "go the smooth way" with the plantation management. They don't seem to have any other option than to stay friends with the management and make sure everything is settled then and there. This in turn reinforces the vulnerability of the workers and allows for the non-functioning juridical system to continue.

Even though the supply chain actors (Ananya Sankalp and the tea plantations), and the certification schemes do not share the view that corruption is a prominent issue in the tea sector they do express what can be seen as governance gaps in other ways. Grandeur Leaf for example, told me about the plantations that had asked the government to install a fixed price for tea to ensure the survival of the plantation.

The response was negative, and no fixed price was imposed, assumed by Grandeur Leaf because the price for tea should be kept low in accordance with the global market to enable exporting.

7.1.3 Global, but also local

One of the key points of SCC is to highlight how global phenomenon also express themselves in, and take advantage of, the local phenomenon. This is interesting when looking at how many of the actors describes the increasingly common occurrence of north Indians migrating to south Indian states to work at plantations, either short or long term. This is happening as the children of south Indian tea plantation workers are increasingly leaving the estates to look for jobs in other sectors, in search for higher wages and a different life according to my informants.

According to the models of SCC, this an example of how the global capitalistic system takes advantage of local inequalities, in this case poorer northern states. North Indians are willing to migrate and thus, the plantations don't need to increase the wages to be able to attract workers. My informants also witness of the increased use of temporary contracts for migrant workers, relieving the plantations of some of their statutory requirements such as providing paid leave. In addition are migrant workers not entitled to the same governmental benefits as south Indians, such as free transportation for women and children, a portion of free rice and their children being able to study in a language they know, leaving the government with less responsibility and the migrant workers in a poorer state.

7.1.4 Market complexity, power dynamics and norms

Axfood is according to the framework of SCC the lead firm in the supply chain and does thus hold an unproportionately large share of the power through monetary- and bargaining advantage. Since the production is outsourced and owned by other companies, they are also avoiding accountability for possible violations of human rights happening in the supply chain. In this specific case of the supply chain of tea, which arguably is a buyer-driven chain, Axfood is able to bargain with traders and suppliers from all across the globe and choose freely amongst them. The tea plantation in turn, selling through the auction hall system and being dependent on freeing their stocks continuously, are in no position to bargain but have to accept the price offered for their tea.

However, even if Axfood would like to take accountability and influence positively, and even if they are willing to let is cost something and lower their own margins, it is not evident how they could do that, despite the power they supposedly possess.

Once again, we come back to the fact that the plantations are selling to many buyers, making the supply chains complex, and connected. Even if Axfood is, or would be, a very important buyer for the plantations they are not the only buyer. Neither are they a granted buyer for long, as the standard practice is to write short term contracts. Thus, it is not worth the risk for the tea plantations to jeopardize their access to the global market by changing business practices that would increase the cost of production, even if Axfood demanded it in all their might.

The concept of SCC implies that to improve successfully in global supply chains, the power dynamics and the norms in the chains must be questioned and overturned. Let's say as an example of this that Axfood would offer to pay more for each kg of tea if the plantation implemented a certain higher standard. This may seem like the straightforward way to take responsibility, give some power back to the plantations by avoiding the auction halls and ease the tension of producing companies having to both offer low prices and implement socially sustainable practices.

Without getting into a complex discussion of what an initiative like the above example would lead to, I want to highlight that standard business practices would need to be altered. For example, long term contracts would be needed, which would mean some stability for the producer but vulnerability for Axfood in terms of prices and availability, and the monitoring of the use of the additional money would be difficult and costly. Again, such consequences raise questions of accountability. Axfood has their own economic and practical interests, why should they risk their own business? Why they and no one else? To disrupt create lasting change business norms would have to be questioned, and in modern days' supply chains there is a lack of accountability and thus little incentives.

Another example of the need for alternative business models can be found in how Verdantia, in contrast to Grandeur Leaf, express positivity around their possibility to improve for workers, despite low prices on tea. Though expressing that the low prices affect them, they did not constantly circle back to it the same way Grandeur Leaf did. This positivity seems to come from the fact that they belong to a conglomerate through which they can access funds specifically for improvements for workers, in addition to the Fairtrade Premium payment they receive. The safety of belonging to a conglomerate, which is not in risk of closing down due to fluctuations in the price of tea on the global market, seemed to give them a sense of stability that Grandeur Leaf was lacking. It creates a slightly different position for

Verdantia in position to global trade and supply chains and could be seen as an alternative to the traditional power dynamics and norms explained by SCC.

From the above reasoning, I agree, on the one hand, with the conclusions of SCC that current norms on the global market would have to be altered for any radical and lasting change to be implemented, such as buying companies paying wages directly to workers. On the other hand, I would disagree with the framework of SCC in how they describe that the lead firm inherently has the most power. In this case I do not see that Axfood has power to influence more than the other involved actors, since they are also restricted by current business norms on the global market.

7.2 Critiques and a little bit of hope

I argue in that although my informants are coming from different backgrounds, bringing very different perspectives and in some ways contradicting each other, their stories do paint a picture of how they are all in stuck, limited in their space for action, that can be brought together and explained by the concept of SCC, and of how the strife for access to markets, as well as governance gaps, influence and restrict actors to function differently from the current business norms.

As mentioned in chapter 5, employing broad generalizations such as the framework of SCC may pose a risk of disregarding the nuanced ways in which actors, individuals, organizations and companies, act and interact. A common critique of such broad descriptions of general phenomenon is that they often fail to acknowledge the diversities in local values, initiatives and actions of people, that does influence the bigger picture to some extent (See for example the critiques of McCarthy (2013)). Anthony Giddens' concept of Space for action used in this thesis describes how individuals' abilities to act are shaped by social structures, such as global business practices, but it also includes that individuals in turn shape the social structures with their actions. I have aimed at, through looking at actors' views and perspectives, adding and contributing to the broad generalization of SCC. However, I believe that there is also evidence in my findings that contradict the large-scale picture that SCC presents, in which it is nearly impossible to create positive change within the current power dynamics and norms of global trade.

I want to highlight that my findings are nuanced, and besides evidence of limitations and constraints in the actors' space for action, it also includes evidence of hope, innovative approaches and mobilization at a large scale. First of all, the very starting-point for this thesis – that Axfood as a company wish to implement living wages in their supply chains – shows that there are global incentives on the market to care. Both Axfood and the certification schemes are members in global

initiatives, where mobilization for the specific cause of living wages are happening. Simply the fact that there is an active civil society of trade unions and NGOs working with advocacy are also important to highlight. Another example of local initiatives and hopeful attitudes are how Verdantia were explicitly positive towards Fairtrade and the possibility the premium payment gave them to invest in the workers welfare. They expressed an excitement for the idea of selling more Fairtrade certified tea because it would enable them to invest in the workers with money specifically designated for that cause.

I also want to clarify that even though SCC seems to presuppose quite revolutionary changes in global business norms and power dynamics for lasting change, there are areas in this specific supply chain that could be changed within the current global trade system. For example, Ananya Sankalp as a key actor in this tea supply chain are today mainly buying tea through the auction hall system and are not having direct contact with the plantation to any large extent, which hinders bargaining and possible collaborations for improvements for workers. To shift the purchasing practices to direct trade and cut out the auction halls may enable new collaborations for workers conditions.

Ananya Sankalp also not express any interest in changing the ways of purchasing, or even engaging with the topics of tea workers conditions. Govindan et al (2021) brings up that lack of awareness and lack of training in sustainability related issues of firms and companies in the supply chains are key barriers in supply chain initiatives. If this is the case for Ananya Sankalp, or if the attitude stems from a lack of prioritization, resources or simply indifference to the issues remains unclear. However, several of the actors have expressed a desire to explore such changes. Both Axfood and Verdantia are eager to find more direct ways of trading, through e.g, buying and selling Fairtrade certified tea, and both are expressing an openness to communication outside of the regular business. This could open for designing alternative ways for purchasing and selling that would improve the abilities for the supply chain actors to influence the conditions of the trade they engage in, and possibly in the long run, improve the abilities to influence the conditions for tea workers.

7.3 Who is able?

There are aspects in my material that both adds to and contradicts the framework of SCC. The actors' express limitations that correspond to the SCC framework, such as experienced constraints by current capitalistic buying norms. I also highlight how the reality is more complex, not necessarily as pre-determined as

SCC suggests and there are many examples to find of movements happening on the global market in relation to human rights and living wages. Thus, I wish to call attention to how the actors express their views on solutions. Below I will outline how the actors believe that conditions for workers can improve in the future, and who is responsible for making this happen. I attempt to summarize what views on development the actors give expressions for, though I do not claim to be able to put each actor into boxes with neat labels on. The actors overlap, and often times express several views on how development happens.

7.3.1 The market

The Indian supply chain actors (plantations, Ananya Sankalp), and to some extent TU1, talk about the market as if it was an actor of itself. Through the market the plantations in Kenya and Uganda, who can produce tea at a lower cost, also become actors who influences the possibility for the Indian tea workers to receive higher wages. Through the market, trends and conditions across oceans become actors to take into account. It is like they put the responsibility and ability on the market to provide the right conditions for them, before they are able to provide any additional benefits to the tea workers. They on the other hand, are required to provide what the market demands – products at a low cost.

As the Indian supply chain actors (Ananya Sankalp, the tea plantations) see the market as responsible for providing the right conditions for improvements for workers to happen, they seem to see their own role to be to focus on “pleasing” the market – such as increasing their effectivity and profitability through mechanization and innovation. I would argue that these actors hold a classical economic theory view and seem to believe in a type of “trickle-down economics”, that more profit for the companies and producers in the supply chain would automatically mean that the surplus “trickle down” to the tea workers.

A few of these “classical economy theory” actors are, at the same time questioning today’s mechanism for trade, quite similar to how the solutions suggested from SCC are phrased. Verdantia och TU2 express that a new system is needed, referring to the current auction hall system, in which producers are not able to bargain for the prices of their teas, but must accept the highest bidding price.

The certifications and Verdantia, who is certified with both Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade, are focusing more on consumer power. They put (some of) the responsibility and ability to influence at consumers who can decide to buy products with a sustainability certification. However, they also reflected on issues of transparency and information overload. To fully rely on that consumer behavior and choices is the main way to improve for workers requires that the consumers

have information available about all the different certifications on the market and understand what all of them stand for.

7.3.2 The government and national mobilization

TU2, Meera Kapoor and the NGO all clearly express that the government has an essential role to play in any development. The government should primarily fight the corruption and the inefficiency that has led to an inadequate implementation of the PLA at the plantations. They share the view that the powerful actors (government, plantation owner, in some cases trade union leaders) in India do not care about the tea workers' rights or wellbeing, and so even if the plantations had more money, it would not lead to any positive changes for the tea workers. They all express those rights, and development, is something the people, trade unions, organizations has had to fight for, by going to strikes, placing demands, opposing, and this is what drives development forward. As Meera Kapoor expressed, even if it does not drive development forward, it prohibits that the development goes backwards.

7.3.3 Global collaborations

Axfood and Rainforest Alliance, in contrast to the others, clearly express that they believe the whole sector must come together in “collaborative dialogues” and find specific solutions for the tea sector if improvements are to happen. To avoid supply chain actors (and other actors) pointing to the low production costs of other producers, keeping it as a key reason for not progressing themselves, the whole industry would need to move forward in similar ways. Similarly to TU2, Meera Kapoor and the NGO, Axfood and Rainforest Alliance also seem to point out that more than improved production of tea is needed and that higher profits not automatically will lead to improved conditions for tea workers. In contrast to the others, they seem to believe that multi-stakeholder initiatives are needed, which according to Brinks et al. (2021) has been popular in the “sustainability sector” since the early 2000s. In a way, Axfood and Rainforest Alliance express a call for the whole sector to take accountability for future development of the tea sector and for tea workers conditions. Exactly how, when and where this would happen, and what the motivator is to join in such collaborative dialogue remains unclear.

Conclusions

The aim of this thesis has been to understand supply chain- and civil society actors' perspectives on their own and others' roles in influencing social conditions for workers in primary production of tea, as well as their general views on what is required for change. The goal of the exploration has been to contribute to the understanding of pre-conditions for supply chains initiatives for sustainability.

The descriptions of the issues for tea workers varies a lot between the actors, and they do not share a common view on the problems. The trade union activist paints a very dull picture and tea plantation owners argue that the workers have everything they need. However, most of the informants mentions in one way or another that the wages for tea workers are low.

All actors express in different ways that they are themselves unable to influence the workers conditions to any larger extent and the reasons given are many. 1) The main reasons expressed by the supply chain actors (Ananya Sankalp, tea plantations) are the price pressing conditions of the global markets, where plantations in Kenya will sell at a lower price and their own need for access to global markets limits their possibility to step out of current business norm, by for example giving workers better condition than what is required by local law. The way they see that workers wages could be increased is through increased profitability in their own production. 2) For the civil society actors (certification schemes and TUs) the main issue is the prevalence of corruption in governments, in plantations and in the main dominant TUs. The corruption and the unwillingness to prioritize workers needs before favouring smooth business for the plantations are hindering change to happen, despite the advocacy work of the TUs and NGOs. 3) The certification schemes, and Axfood, are also bound by the business norms on the global market, and the plantations' need for access to markets – for example, Fairtrade needs to adjust their standards in a way that a Fairtrade certified plantation can still sell uncertified goods to the global market. They all see the need for the whole tea sector to move forward in unison, and thus collaborative dialogues and initiatives across the sector will be key.

Though the actors have vastly different positions and reasons that they give for the limitation of their *space for action*, I argue in this thesis that the framework of *supply chain capitalism* help us see how their experience of limitations are connected to one another. The framework of SCC explains the plantations' and tea suppliers constant strife for access to markets, and how governments are also influenced to prioritize companies' access to markets to secure the national economy, rather than workers' rights. Lead firms and certification schemes also have difficulties finding radical ways to demand eg, higher wages for workers at the plantations, as they too must accept that they are a part of a complex web of companies in global trade, where current business norms implies that firms upstream need to maintain access to many buyers, and thus, behave in a way that gives them competitive advantage. Through this we can better understand how the constraints that the actors express fit together in the complex web of global capitalism. It can help us understand why certain actors have, or experience that they have, difficulties in seeing any possibility for them to influence positive change, and why they see others as more responsible.

According to the concepts of SCC any lasting solution or initiative (including certifications), would need to fundamentally question inherent norms on today's mainstream global market, which creates the limitations that our actors experience. My findings are in line with this, given the above arguments of how the need to access markets constrains the actors in my study to influence tea workers' conditions to any larger extent. However, I also criticise some of the claims of SCC, such as the importance they place on the power of lead firms (Axfood) at mainstream markets to create change. I argue instead that the lead firms too often are limited by the capitalistic business norms of global trade and cannot influence their business partners to act in a way that would jeopardize their competitiveness (such as higher production costs). I have also found evidence in the material that contradicts the position of SCC that disrupting the traditional global trade completely is the one way to create lasting change. The attitudes of Axfood and Verdentia, who are both eager to engage in more direct trade with each other and to invest in the Fairtrade Premium for workers, are examples of signs of hope even within existing supply chains.

To conclude, this thesis outlines that the supply chain- and civil society actors, connected to tea in South India, being examined in this study has quite different views on problems and solutions, their own and others' roles. However, they all express that they are unable to influence, due to global systems of capitalism. When planning supply chain initiatives for sustainability it could be of importance to consider 1) that the engaged actors may have quite different perspectives of the problem definition 2) that they may also have different perspective on who is

responsible for initiating and paying the costs for improvements for workers and 3) that initiatives may need to be designed with a consciousness of how engaged actors are limited and restricted in their positions at the global market.

Previous research has, as outlined in chapter 3, focused mainly on environmental and economic aspects of supply chain initiatives and on what seems to be general barriers and hinders for sustainability initiatives, mentioning financial constraints, dysfunctional governmental institutions, and lack of awareness and knowledge of sustainability issues. My analysis confirms many of the hinders and barriers for sustainability initiatives mentioned in previous research, but it also adds to the literature by focusing specifically of social aspects for workers and pointing to the importance of 1) paying attention to engaged actors' experiences of their space for action, and analyzing the power dynamics and norms defining the supply chain in question and 2) paying attention to the actors' different views and beliefs of what will lead to long-lasting change.

For future research it would be interesting to 1) further investigate the perspectives of actors engaged with global supply chains towards different types of sustainability initiatives. For example, how do supply chain- and civil society actors view the standpoint of SCC, that norms and power dynamics need to be overturned? And 2) explore the topic of improvements in supply chains with more actors included, such as government officials and, even more importantly, the tea workers themselves.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide (general)

What is your role at XX?

How long have you worked?

VIEW ON SELF/ACTORS

- The role of XX in pushing sustainability forward, driving change?
- Describe the most pressing issues on social sustainability?
- In what way are XX working with this issue? In what way not? Who is?
- What has been the biggest changes done in the near history to improve for workers? Any examples? Which actors were involved in that process?
- Any actor you wish would be more active? (Suppliers, government etc)

COLLABORATION BETWEEN ACTORS

- In your daily work, which stakeholders are you in contact with regularly?
- Has this changed over time?
- Do XX cooperate with, and in what way:
 - Tea plantations
 - NGOs
 - Trade unions
 - Governmental representatives
 - Certification schemes
 - UPASI/TEA BOARD
- Why not? Any point in collaboration?
- Have you seen broader types of collaborations – eg brand owners, plantations, trade unions, NGOs, government?

- Do you have or have any plans for any other type of collaboration with other actors (on sustainability or other theme)?
- Any wishes for other collaborations? What could be successful?

SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

- Any examples of sustainability initiatives where XX has been active? (How, with whom etc)
- Is it common that western/big companies want to implement sustainability projects?
- What does XX think about supply chain sustainability initiative? Can it be effective?

DECENT WAGES

- I Hear it is challenging for many tea plantations to offer decent housing, health care, schools + wages to tea workers – thoughts on this?
- What support would be needed?
- Could another system be better? Eg Small Tea Producer system. What benefits are there?
- Many are interested in living wages – your thoughts on this matter? Possibilities to increase wages? How could it happen?
- How do you think the wages can be raised long term? Who needs to act, what needs to change?

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