

**end  
child  
marriage**

**A voice. A chance. A future.**

**unicef** 

for every child

Photo Credit: © UNICEF/Boro/2019

# Creating a **Safe Environment** for **Children and Adolescents** in Tea Gardens of Assam

## An Overview



# Creating a **Safe Environment** **for Children and Adolescents** in Tea Gardens of Assam

**An Overview**





# Contents

<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. Setting the Context</b>	<b>7</b>
The tea industry in Assam	7
The tea communities of Assam	7
The adolescent empowerment programme in tea gardens	8
<b>2. Investing in Adolescent Empowerment</b>	<b>10</b>
Government of Assam's commitment to overall development of the state	10
Defining the contours of engagement	10
Formation of adolescent groups	10
Encouraging adolescent participation	11
Giving sports pride of place	14
<b>3. Broadening the Scope of Adolescent Empowerment Programming</b>	<b>15</b>
Including health and nutrition along with agency	15
Adolescent girls made to understand the merits of nutrition	16
Emerging need for a wider programmatic canvas	16
<b>4. Setting up Child Protection Committees in Tea Gardens</b>	<b>17</b>
Sowing the seeds of community level child protection mechanisms	17
CPCs taking initiative	18
Keeping an eye out	19
<b>5. Tea Industry Partnering with the State Government</b>	<b>20</b>
Bringing government services into tea gardens	20
Advocating at the state level	20
Making business sense	21
<b>6. Unfolding Improvements</b>	<b>22</b>
Improvements in adolescent health	22
Enhanced inclination towards education	22
Institutionalising welfare approach among tea companies	23
<b>7. Recommendations for Way Forward</b>	<b>24</b>
Reaching the most marginalised with AGGs and CPCs	24
Sustained focus on child trafficking	24
More higher education and skilling options	24
Building affiliations for enhanced opportunities	24
Granting statutory recognition to tea garden CPCs	25

# Abbreviations

ABITA	:	Assam Branch of Indian Tea Association
AGG	:	Adolescent Girls' Group
ANM	:	Auxiliary Nurse Midwife
ASCPCR	:	Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights
ASHA	:	Accredited Social Health Activist
AWC	:	Anganwadi Centre
AWW	:	Anganwadi Worker
BCP	:	Bhartiya Cha Parishad
CPC	:	Child Protection Committee
CPS	:	Child Protection Services
CSR	:	Corporate Social Responsibility
DCPU	:	District Child Protection Unit
FFL	:	Facts for Life
GBV	:	Gender-based Violence
GoA	:	Government of Assam
ICDS	:	Integrated Child Development Services
IFA	:	Iron and Folic Acid
NRHM	:	National Rural Health Mission
PLA	:	Plantation Labour Act, 1951
RMSA	:	Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan
RTE	:	Right to Education
S4D	:	Sports for Development
SBA	:	Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan
SC	:	Scheduled Caste
SCPS	:	State Child Protection Society
SDG	:	Sustainable Development Goal
SSA	:	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan
SSY	:	Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana
ST	:	Scheduled Tribe
TSC	:	Total Sanitation Campaign
VLPCPC	:	Village level Child Protection Committee
WIFS	:	Weekly Iron Folic Acid Supplementation

# Setting the Context

Assam is one of the north eastern states in India and is famously known as the 'land of the red river and the blue hills' (the mighty Brahmaputra river flows through the hilly state). It covers a geographical area of 78,438 sq. kms (Census 2011). Its 3.12 crore people account for 68.4% of the population of the north eastern states. The state's demographic profile includes 34.22% Muslims, 12% Scheduled Tribes (STs)<sup>1</sup> and 7.15% Scheduled Castes (SCs)<sup>2</sup>.

In Assam, one in every three women (32.6%) aged 20-24 years was married before the legal age of 18 years. Approximately 13.6% women aged 15-19 have started childbearing in Assam, increasing their susceptibility to serious health risks and reduced life choices (NFHS-4, 2015-16).

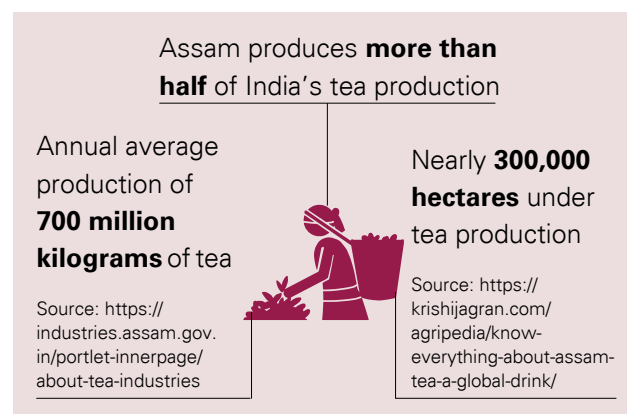
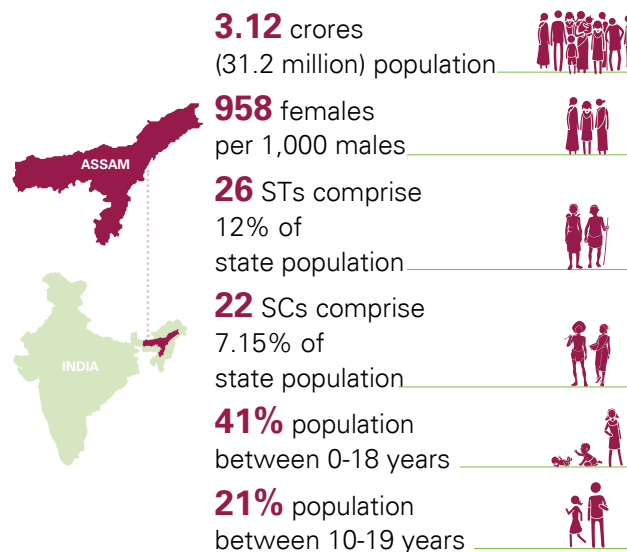
## The tea industry in Assam

Assam is one of the key tea contributors in the country with a lion's share of 51% of the overall tea production. The Assam tea industry forms a significant part of the economy of the state and dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Assam Company was founded in 1839. Assam's famed tea forms the base ingredient for most popular global tea blends.

The Assam tea industry is comprised of around 800 big tea gardens and 1.18 lakh small tea gardens<sup>3</sup>. The large tea associations include Assam Branch of Indian Tea Association (ABITA) and Bhartiya Cha Parishad (BCP) and there are numerous other tea associations and federations that provide support to tea gardens in trade.

## The tea communities of Assam

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tea garden tribes of Assam were transported by the British from neighbouring states including present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal and constitute an estimated 17% of the state's population. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 (PLA) governs the



Indian tea industry. The law covers working hours, wages, and leave, while also providing clear guidelines for healthcare, sanitation, canteens, accommodation, educational, recreational, and other facilities that the tea gardens must provide for their workers.

Due to the expansive nature of the tea gardens and their distance from the cities, tea garden communities are largely confined to the gardens, with very restricted exposure to the outside world. This has limited their opportunities for education and narrowed their interaction with the outside world. Employment outside the tea gardens has thus far, been largely an unthinkable option for them.

<sup>1</sup> <http://nhsrcindia.org/sites/default/files/hmis/Demographic%20Status%20of%20Scheduled%20Tribe%20Population%20-%20NHSRC.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://socialjustice.nic.in/UserView/index?mid=76663>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.daijiworld.com/news/newsDisplay.aspx?newsID=754988>



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

## Double marginalisation

Tea garden communities face **double marginalisation** – they live excluded from the rest of society and they are not able to access social protection benefits to the extent that they would have in their states of origin.

Despite forming a considerable percentage of the state's population and contributing to the economy of the state, the tea garden workers are not recognised under SC or ST categories in the state. They also have limited access to social protection benefits because of lack of awareness. Though their situation has improved considerably in the present day, alcoholism, trafficking of young girls, domestic abuse and witch hunting are prevalent social problems. Lack of social protection, educational facilities and employment opportunities lead to elopement being accepted and common among adolescents. Remnants of colonial culture are still visible in these tea gardens where whispered voices, lowered eyes and silent obedience were norms for long.

## Women and adolescent girls in tea gardens

Around half of the one million workers in the tea gardens are women. With nimble hands, they are customarily chosen for plucking tea leaves. A study has shown that health indicators among women and

girls working in tea plantations are poor, with almost half of them being stunted and 96.7% anaemic<sup>4</sup>. These poor health indicators result in high maternal mortality, under-nutrition and low learning levels.

Tea garden workers being marginalised communities, adolescents have faced the consequences of exclusion. They have been part of a 'culture of silence' which brings low confidence and they lack support to bring them out of this vicious circle. All these factors have an impact on their safety and wellbeing.

## The adolescent empowerment programme in tea gardens

To break the prevalent culture of silence among adolescents, it was imperative to provide them with safe spaces where they could meet, feel comfortable and begin to open up and gradually build their confidence. A long-term programme for adolescent engagement was begun and has evolved over the years in a relatable and relevant manner using time-tested methods of adolescent group formation, participation and expression.

<sup>4</sup> Vir Sheila et al, December 2008; AMCH RMRC Baseline 2011



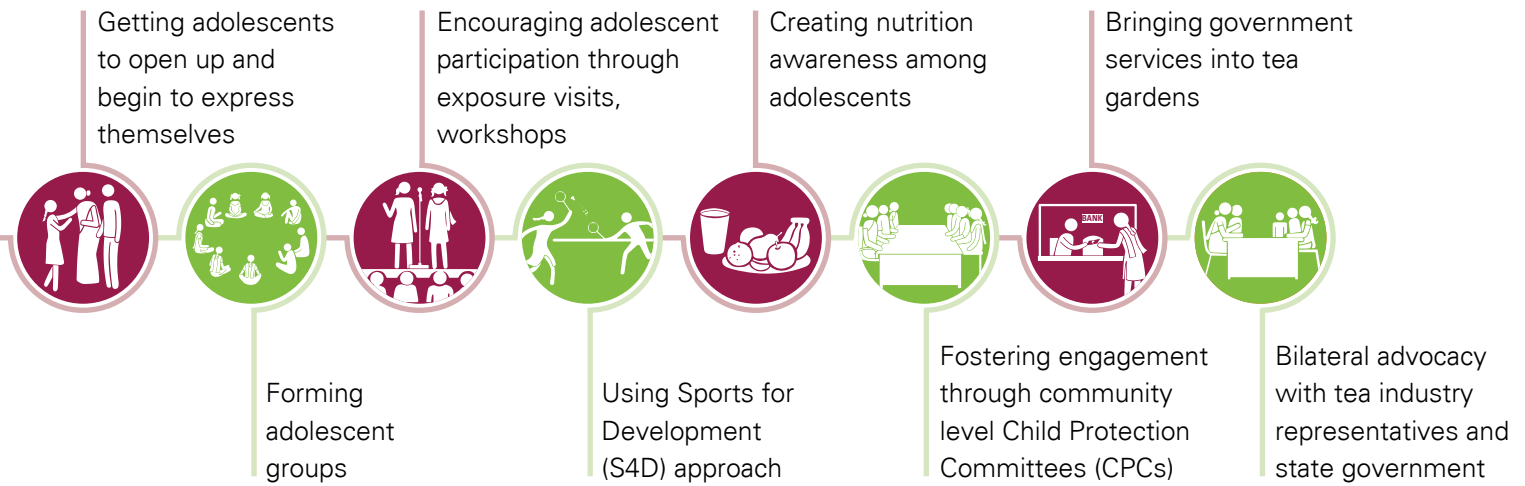


Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

In collaboration with the tea industry and the district administrations in tea districts of Assam, gradual steps were taken to help adolescents start their journey towards self-confidence, self-expression and ultimately participation. The first and most important step was to form adolescent groups.

Over the course of more than 13 years since 2007, these groups have been formed in 205 tea gardens across nine districts of Assam (Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Charaideo, Sonitpur, Udalguri, Golaghat, Jorhat and Biswanath) by collectivising in- and out-of-school adolescent girls and boys in tea gardens.

### Timeline and reach of adolescent empowerment programme (2007-20)



**358**  
Adolescent  
Girls' Groups  
(AGGs) formed

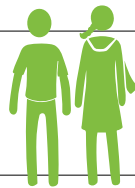
**26,826**  
adolescent  
girls registered  
in AGGs

**144**  
adolescent  
boys' groups  
formed

**5,624**  
adolescent  
boys  
registered

**1,255** adolescent girls above  
the age of 18 are unmarried  
and regularly attend schools  
in the project area

**700** adolescents  
(girls and boys) are part of  
adolescent reporters' group



**8** responsible media  
reports on child rights  
and adolescent issues

**14** newsletters (digital and print) and **4** block  
wallpapers produced by young reporters

Source: UNICEF reported indicators

# Investing in Adolescent Empowerment

The adolescent empowerment programme in tea gardens has uniquely built and leveraged various partnerships with the tea industry (including tea gardens, tea associations, certification agencies, tea corporate houses, tea retailers [both national and international], tea sellers consortiums etc.) and integrated with the government for providing essential child protection services. The partnerships work in a mutually beneficial manner with each partner playing their role in bringing more essential services into tea gardens and creating a safe and protective environment for children and adolescents.

## Government of Assam's (GoA's) commitment to overall development of the state

GoA has shown its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its vision for a developed and prosperous state is linked to the achievement of the 17 SDGs by 2030, through a holistic all-round effort. The government is earnest in its efforts to fulfil this commitment. UNICEF has been a trusted partner of GoA and its work in the state is geared towards propelling the state in the direction of this commitment.

## Defining the contours of engagement

Work on the adolescent empowerment programme was initiated in 30 tea gardens of Dibrugarh district

in 2007. The programme aimed to build adolescent agency under the aegis of an overall child protection, nutrition, education and WASH programme.

The broader objective was to create inroads into families and communities within the tea gardens to strengthen child protection systems and facilitate programmes focusing on the welfare of the tea community.

The entire journey of adolescent empowerment began with organic and need-based activities and evolved in a similar manner. Multiple initiatives and steps were taken in the direction of empowering adolescents, among the initial ones being formation of adolescent groups and sensitisation of key stakeholders. Tea garden managers, Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) and school teachers among others were systematically sensitised on issues related to child rights and child protection. Prevention of child marriages was kept high on the agenda and active efforts were made to stop child marriages.

## Formation of adolescent groups

Prior to the programme, adolescents did not have any negotiation power and lived in a 'culture of silence'. Therefore, focused efforts were made to collectivise adolescents by providing them a platform for expressing themselves, building their



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020



What began in 2007 with 30 tea gardens is seeing a third generation of adolescents across 205 gardens benefitting from partnerships between the tea industry, the state government and UNICEF.

confidence and understanding how to advocate for themselves. In the very beginning, to break the ice and help adolescents become comfortable with expressing themselves, they were taught simple skills such as responding to greetings with a *Namaskar*, telling people where they were from and saying 'thank you' at the end of a conversation. Thereafter, instilling confidence in them has been done over the years through intense engagement in multiple ways – life skills sessions, in-depth discussions etc. Trainings have been conducted for adolescent girls and peer leaders in each group. Dropouts are counselled to go back to schools.

AGGs with girls between the ages of 11-19 years were formed initially by community mobilisers with the support of frontline workers and teachers. Towards enhancing gender equality and resilience, engagement with boys between 11-14 years was also started since 2017 and adolescent boys' groups are now steadily taking hold in tea gardens. Since 2020, there is greater emphasis on the participation of boys in the adolescent groups in tea gardens with a focus on positive masculinity.

Previously when I used to visit the tea gardens, girls were shy and hesitant to open up and share their thoughts. Now, they are opening up and speaking, and some of them even take sessions in the weekly meetings. Each adolescent group had two peer leaders. We used to rotate the peer leaders so that each of them got a chance to be a leader in that group and each leader was given certain responsibilities such as starting and ending the session and selecting a topic for the session.

**Kalpa Chetia**

Project Manager, UNICEF-BCP Project

At the level of tea gardens i.e. the **community level**, the areas of attention have been establishment and strengthening of two key community based groups – adolescent groups and CPCs. At the **district level**, the stress has been on strengthening service delivery under services of health, education and sanitation as mandated in POSHAN Abhiyaan, the Right to Education (RTE) and Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan (SBA). Efforts have also been made to empower adolescents to access benefits for which they are eligible under Child Protection Services (CPS), Sukanya Samridhi Yojana (SSY), schemes specifically for youth in tea gardens that can be accessed online through the SIRISH portal (Tea Tribes Welfare Department), and Majoni. Assistance is provided to them and their families to open bank accounts so that they can receive scheme benefits. At the **state level**, attention is focused on strengthening child protection systems through effective implementation of child related laws, statutes and guidelines aimed at protection of children against vulnerabilities.

## Encouraging adolescent participation

Adolescent safety is a crucial topic of discussion for the adolescent groups. They are trained in early detection, reporting and action on incidents of abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect of children and adolescents in tea gardens and provided contact details of CHILDLINE, the police, frontline workers etc. They are taken on **exposure visits** to police stations, hospitals, and to District Legal Aid Cells to learn first-hand about their services and interact with service providers. Such interactions help them to become confident, converse with strangers and become familiar with asking for services from duty-bearers. Empowered with knowledge, they



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020





Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

now report problems and complaints to tea garden management staff, welfare officers, line *chowkidars*, CPCs, school/college teachers, ANMs, ASHAs, AWWs, CPCs, Police, CHILDLINE 1098 and the district administration.

Adolescents are also trained in **folklore performances**, street theatre and sports to express themselves and further build their confidence. These performances help encourage dialogue between adults and children on adolescent-related issues and social norms that affect them. They are taught

to develop 'on-the-spot-scripts' during folklore sessions and encouraged to be creative. Facts for Life (FLL) videos developed by UNICEF are shown to adolescents in garden-level viewing sessions to impart useful health and nutrition advice and awareness about child labour and child marriage.

**Conventions** are held for adolescent girls to build their awareness on various services and schemes available for adolescent groups, provide them a space for experience and knowledge sharing and showcase their latent talents. *Kishori Diwas* has



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020



become an occasion to bring together girls from different tea gardens. These events are an enjoyable experience for the girls with song and dance performances, quizzes and debates and enthusiastic participation of girls from groups. Block officials also mark their presence in these events, witnessing the confidence these girls have developed.

**Residential and non-residential workshops** have also been organised on issues related to life skills, social mobilisation, protection and nutrition. Peer leaders and members of AGGs from several tea gardens have participated in these interactive workshops. The workshops dealt with self-exploration, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, goal setting, leadership, child rights and accessing government flagship programmes.

Twenty-two tea estates built **information centres**, in spaces provided by the tea garden management. ABITA organised resource materials and books for adolescents. These were spaces where adolescents learned and gathered knowledge on a myriad of issues such as studies and careers; government schemes and flagship programmes; health and hygiene; vocational training courses; livelihood and skill development; local services and opportunities; youth rights; social welfare entitlements and rights at school and in the family.

**The more I go to the club, each Sunday, the more I get to learn about new issues. Through sports and games I am able to learn new things. I now know about the ill effects of child marriage and child labour, about how a girl should take care of herself during menstruation including how to use pads, and the importance of consuming nutritious food.**

**Holika Mollik**  
17-year-old girl in tea estate  
Charaideo district

**Earlier people did not understand me and nor did they take me seriously. They would say that 'She is too young to speak about such things' But, after I became a member of the AGG, people listen to what I have to say and I can share what I've learned in the group meetings.**

**Junaki Majuwar**  
18-year-old girl in tea estate  
Dibrugarh district



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

Adolescents are getting empowered. They can now raise their voice in front of others, they can share their problems and also their thoughts with each other. They are also getting a platform to showcase their talents. Child marriage and elopement has reduced. Dropout cases have reduced and schooling has also improved.

**Doli Prova Kalita**  
Secretary, UNICEF-BCP Project

### Giving sports pride of place

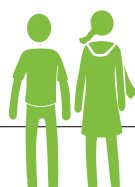
The programme has succeeded in bringing out the hitherto unexplored interest of adolescent girls in sports. Workshops have been organised on football,

volleyball, handball and karate. Professional coaches are hired by District Sports Offices or District Sports Associations for these workshops, which span around 10-12 days. The children and adolescents at tea gardens showcase their talent and several have exhibited exceptional calibre in these sports.

In 2012, some AGG members were sent to Delhi to participate in a seminar and also in the London Olympics. Among them, Pinky Karmakar, an adolescent group member from a tea garden in Dibrugarh district, was chosen to be one of the torchbearers in the London Olympics. She has gone on to successfully complete her schooling.

### Impact (till June 2020)

**67.69%**  
adolescents accessing social protection schemes



**57.84%**  
adolescents disapprove of violence against girls and boys

**63.41%**  
adolescents perceive that issues such as child marriage, gender-based violence (GBV) are decreasing in their community

**92.1%**  
adolescents have access to functional reporting and grievance redressal mechanisms

Source: 2019 Baseline survey



## Broadening the Scope of Adolescent Empowerment Programming

### Including health and nutrition along with agency

Towards the end of 2010, an intensive mapping of tea gardens showed that 95-96% adolescent girls were anaemic. Along with adolescent empowerment, the objective of this partnership was to improve the nutritional status of adolescent girls in the programme tea estates through health and nutrition-related interventions. These included weekly administration of supervised Iron and Folic Acid (IFA) tablets for anaemia control and prevention, building awareness on health and nutrition, encouraging tea garden workers and adolescents to develop their own kitchen gardens, holding cooking demonstrations to help develop an understanding of food diversity and encouraging appropriate dietary intake and habits. There was a specific focus on explaining the ill effects of drinking tea with salt (a common practice in the tea gardens).

Life skills remained a key component of adolescent group sessions. They focused on problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication, and all the other essential aspects critical for overall growth and development. These life skills sessions also steadily led to enhanced communication and even leadership skills.

The adolescent groups in these tea gardens became platforms for cohesive action, and motivation and counselling of peers to ensure adherence to weekly IFA administration. Peer leaders motivated large numbers of adolescent girls to be diligent about the consumption of IFA tablets. These efforts bore positive results. Timely and regular consumption of IFA reflected in more energy, less fatigue and better attention span, as conveyed by adolescents. Working with adolescent groups and the community led to major wins for the programme.



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

## Adolescent girls made to understand the merits of nutrition

Nutrition education was imparted to AGGs by government resource persons in coordination with the tea garden management. AGG sessions brought attention to health issues and informed the girls about anaemia and its signs and prevention, food and health hygiene, kitchen gardens and the nutritional value of locally available low cost foods, the importance of using sanitary toilets, safe drinking water and the importance of washing hands with soap. Cooking demonstrations and cooking competitions were undertaken as an ongoing activity to improve food habits and promote consumption of nutritious foods.

FFL videos developed by UNICEF were shown to adolescents in garden-level viewing sessions to impart useful health and nutrition advice and awareness about child labour and child marriage.

AGGs also started building awareness of members on flagship government programmes such as Weekly Iron Folic Acid Supplementation (WIFS). In this way, there has been a consistent effort to link them with government services of health, education and sanitation as mandated in RTE, SBA and later, POSHAN Abhiyaan.

## Emerging need for a wider programmatic canvas

The programme interventions highlighted the need to strengthen basic services, improve the quality of service delivery and enhance the capacities of adolescents and their larger communities in the tea gardens. Convergence between field-level functionaries in tea gardens and government frontline workers posed a challenge. These emerged as priority areas of action.



4

# Setting up Child Protection Committees in Tea Gardens

Changing social norms around child marriage, child labour, adolescent education and skill development requires collective knowledge building, reflection, internalisation and localised solutions. Forming CPCs in marginalised tea garden communities dovetails into the mandate of the national flagship CPS.

## Sowing the seeds of community level child protection mechanisms

Along with collectivising adolescents, since 2007, CPCs have also been created in the 205 programme tea gardens in close coordination with the tea garden management to support adolescents. The tea garden's Welfare Officer is the garden management representative in these committees. Frontline workers such as AWWs and ASHAs, a lower primary school teacher, line *chowkidars*, a member of the mothers' group, labour union and student union leaders are the other members of the CPC. Two AGG members bring in adolescent representation. These committees take up issues related to child protection, child marriage, child labour, school dropout and absenteeism, safe drinking water, use of sanitary toilets among others.

Capacity building workshops were organised for CPC members to strengthen the CPCs and to create an enabling and safe environment for all children and

**The CPC is very beneficial for us. Earlier, many young boys and girls were susceptible to early marriage but after CPC formation, we have organised meetings to discuss the harmful effects of child marriage. We have been able to reduce child marriage considerably. Now, there may be one or two cases and even in that case, we try to make the concerned persons understand by meeting and counselling them.**

**Paul Sona**  
Parent and CPC member, Tinsukia district

**We give more focus on adolescent girls – whether they are taking iron tablets, are able to go to school, if girls face any problems during their periods, or if any girl or boy has left school or has been harassed. Efforts are made to address all these issues. Plans are made every month and accordingly the CPC performs its work."**

**Rita Gowala**  
Head Teacher in a tea garden school  
Dibrugarh district

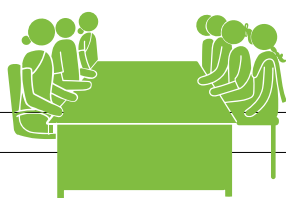
### Outreach (till June 2020)

**205**  
CPCs formed  
in tea estates

**2,743**  
CPC members

**6**  
cases of violence, harassment,  
exploitation and abuse addressed  
by CPCs, social workers and police

Source: UNICEF reported indicators



**80.4%**  
workers and community members  
report increased awareness of  
child rights and child protection

**71.78%**  
community members disapprove of  
child marriage, GBV, discrimination,  
sexual harassment and alcoholism

Source: 2019 Baseline survey



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

adolescents. These workshops brought clarity on the roles and responsibilities of a CPC member. They also oriented the members on correct communication, promoted behaviour change on traditional practices, and taught them how to address specific issues relating to children and women within the community, along with the legal provisions under CPS.

### CPCs taking initiative

Community members now feel more at ease with the concept of group meetings in which the tea garden management is also present. This has been the first step in CPC formation. Rather than being a “committee” in the formal sense, these are viewed as community gatherings where members participate by becoming comfortable with the idea of a meeting and slowly begin to express themselves and think as a collective which can take decisions and implement them on their own terms, rather than being passive recipients of services.

During CPC meetings, issues such as eloping and child labour, dropouts and school absenteeism, cases of violence and abuse against children and adolescents, toilet and safe drinking water availability and water borne diseases are discussed. Cases reported by adolescent groups of violence against children are immediately followed up. CPCs also address issues of malnutrition and accessing benefits of scholarships and schemes. In this way, a safety net has been created for children and adolescents by building an enabling environment.

Adolescents have begun to trust CPCs as a body to seek support from and increasingly report cases of violence and abuse to them. CPCs also proactively monitor their localities themselves and the general community has begun to take note of the emphasis on child protection.

Prominent days such as Child Protection Day, International Women’s Day and World Water Day were also observed in the form of community celebration. Communities were sensitised on issues of child protection, nutrition and WASH through wall paintings in prominent places such as tea garden schools, hospitals, Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) etc.

“Tea garden welfare officers are the presidents of tea garden CPCs. As management representatives, they play a vital role. The committees constitute of tea garden stakeholders such as teachers, ASHAs, line chowkidars, mothers’ group members, health assistants, and adolescent girls and boys group members. We always coordinate with AWWs and ASHAs. We have also organised trainings for assigned AWWs on child protection and child development themes.”

**Muktikam Bordoloi**  
Programme Manager, ABITA



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

## Keeping an eye out

CPCs have been oriented on the mechanism for detecting, reporting and taking action about cases of child labour, elopement, dropouts, sexual abuse etc. They have been sensitised on these issues and enabled to use their existing networks in the community to lend credibility to the child protection mandate. Before CPCs were formed, community members did not know how to report cases and get them resolved. With the formation

and strengthening of CPCs, these barriers are being overcome. As soon as they hear of a case or if adolescents directly report any cases of violation of their rights, they verify it and then swiftly act to address the problem or inform the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU), CHILDLINE or the police.

Community-level sensitisation meetings are also held on issues of child protection. These awareness efforts contribute immensely towards creating an enabling environment.



# Tea Industry Partnering with the State Government

The tea industry as a strategic and active partner in the adolescent empowerment programme has benefited through enhancing services for workers and adolescents in tea gardens and their involvement forms a part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and boosts their certification by external certification agencies. The district administrations have provided valuable support and district and block officials, frontline workers and teachers have actively participated in the interventions.

## Bringing government services into tea gardens

At the tea garden level, improved coordination between government agencies, tea estates and tea garden associations has led to adolescents receiving timely services and creating an enabling environment. These measures are conducive to productivity of the tea garden workforce as well. Adolescents from tea garden communities are also now considering higher studies and taking up livelihood opportunities such as tailoring, carpentry etc. which provide useful satellite services to support the primary occupation of tea picking in the gardens.

Tea gardens have been brought into the ambit of national flagship programmes such as the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Total Sanitation

Campaign (TSC). Consistent access building has been done to ensure that adolescents have functional bank accounts and are able to avail the benefits of social protection schemes.

## Advocating at the state level

At the state level, UNICEF advocated and engaged with key state-level organisations and departments, to address some of the key child protection concerns of the state and strengthen the existing child protection systems in Assam. This included a wide range of departments: Department of Social Welfare; Department of Labour; the Gauhati High Court; National Law University, Assam; Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (ASCPCR); Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA); Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA); and Assam Police. These wide ranging efforts were made to ensure proper implementation of various child-related laws, guidelines, policies and schemes in the tea-intensive districts of Assam.

Child and adolescent rights were primarily promoted through consolidating partnerships with two key state-level institutions – SCPS, Assam and ASCPCR. Support was provided to SCPS in building capacities and handholding DCPUs at the district level. In addition, SCPS built visibility around the issues of child marriage, child trafficking, child labour and the provisions of the POCSO Act through diverse mediums such as television and radio programmes



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020





and jingles. These awareness campaigns drew attention of the wider public to various child protection services available in the district.

Advocacy is ongoing with the tea industry and state government as key partners for inclusion of development issues related to women and children of the tea communities into the state government's agenda.

### **Making business sense**

Along with the impetus on boosting tea production, there has been an ever-growing recognition of the importance of including definite human rights principles into business practices in the tea

industry. Over the years, government services have been introduced into tea estates with tea garden management playing a proactive role in ensuring access to these services for tea garden workers. UNICEF has played a pivotal role in supporting these partnerships to align with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The programme has led to the improvement of living and working conditions of tea garden workers and this in turn has enhanced their productivity leading to better outputs and increased tea production. The mutually beneficial nature of the interventions underlines its sustainability for over 13 years and the momentum by the tea industry to continue it in the future.

## Unfolding Improvements

The strong partnerships that have been forged with leadership by the tea industry have helped in steady progress towards creating a safe and secure environment for children and adolescents. Many of the successes will continue to be cemented with continued strengthening of adolescent groups and CPCs. The ethical business principles adopted by the tea industry have helped the tea industry workforce and improved the lives of adolescents and their communities in the gardens.

### Improvements in adolescent health

Tea garden communities are going through a transition and their health status has been improving steadily including a lowering in anaemia and malnutrition levels. Adolescent girls and members of the workforce, once oriented on anaemia, have started taking their IFA supplementation regularly and consuming nutritious food. AGG sessions have increased the motivation levels among adolescent girls. With improved health, girls are more energetic, more regular in schools and can take up activities like cycling. Their results have improved by leaps and bounds – from 32% clearing their matriculation in 2011 to 49% in 2019.

An Indian Tea Association study on anaemia has shown the correlation between higher levels of haemoglobin and higher productivity, improved health and income. It is a win-win situation for the community as well as the tea garden management. Controlling anaemia has therefore been a major achievement of the programme.

The positive results of this nutrition-related initiative gave a big boost to the child protection programme which has been working in the tea garden over more than 13 years. Closely intertwining nutrition with child protection and adolescent empowerment helped communities and adolescents understand that these issues are interlinked, with each having an impact on the other.

### Enhanced inclination towards education

Due to the programme interventions, many more adolescent girls have decided to continue their studies after matriculation and complete their Class 12. This has been a result of counselling in AGG sessions, which emphasised not getting married before the legal age and completing education to become independent. Girls are also considering taking up vocations like tailoring within the tea garden and have also begun to think about avenues of employment outside the gardens.



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020





Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

Asian University for Women, Bangladesh, a renowned university funded by the World Bank, works with marginalised girls especially in developing countries. In 2018, a team from the University visited Dibrugarh, interviewed adolescent girls and selected three out of 21 girls for a scholarship of USD 75,000 a year. The girls are now living in the University hostel. This has been an encouraging result for girls from the tea garden communities.

### **Institutionalising welfare approach among tea companies**

The tea industry actively partnered with district administrations and UNICEF to work towards the education of children living in the tea gardens.

There has been a realisation that the betterment of children and adolescents in the tea gardens will eventually be in the interest of the tea garden management. Educating children in the tea gardens would help them make a life for themselves outside the tea gardens. This strategy was aimed to break the cycle of tea gardens feeling pressured with increasing number of people looking for employment and gradually ease the burden on the limited resources of the tea gardens in the long term.

UNICEF's work with the Certification Agencies was instrumental in including a clause for mandated CSR on the part of tea companies, for necessary certification. Inclusion of this clause has supported tea companies in working to meet the welfare needs of the tea garden workers.

# Recommendations for Way Forward

There are many plans in the pipeline, including providing vocational skills and opportunities for higher studies to adolescents and getting statutory recognition for CPCs as part of CPS which will help institutionalise the body.



## Reaching the most marginalised with AGGs and CPCs

The child protection programme among tea garden communities has created a blueprint for working with the most marginalised populations. Systemic capacities have been built, and mechanisms have been created and standardised in the programme districts. This knowledge and extensive experience can be accessed and replicated through government machinery in other districts.



## Sustained focus on child trafficking

A continued focus is needed on child trafficking, which is a serious issue in many districts of Assam, including the project districts. Therefore, sustained efforts towards awareness generation and advocacy programmes are required to bring more visibility to the issue.



## More higher education and skilling options

With a lot more children going to school, the tea gardens have started providing facilities such as school buses to children leaving the campus for other institutions. Every child in the tea gardens, whether a boy or a girl, now wants to go to school. With the increasing interest in education there is a need for more government schools in the tea gardens.

Alongside, there is a need to build avenues for higher education for both boys and girls, closer home. One of the

key reasons for adolescents to not opt for higher studies is lack of opportunities and their unwillingness to travel long distances to far off places, without any provision for accommodation, to continue their education. Higher education institutions being in the vicinity will increase the chances of adolescents using easier options like cycling to reach the institution. This will help prevent overcrowding of villages and instances of children dropping out of school after Class 8. These improvements in infrastructure are needed for the education situation to turn around.

There is a need to increase investments in skill development and generate employment opportunities. Also, many adolescents from tea gardens want to explore work opportunities outside the gardens. Their skilling is important to help make this happen.



**Nowadays skill development is very important. There is no guarantee that youth will get jobs. Therefore, if some skills or livelihood training can be given to them such as weaving or cutting or if materials and supplies can be arranged for them, then they can become independent.**



**Powon Bhumij**

Head Teacher in a tea garden school  
Dibrugarh district



## Building affiliations for enhanced opportunities

It is crucial to build linkages with bigger state and national level institutions to provide promising girls opportunities for their skill development. For example, building a linkage with the Sports Authority of India would help in bringing exposure and help these children and



adolescents get enrolled into national level sports programmes. Though football is one of the favourite games on the tea gardens, children need more opportunities. There need to be some urgent steps to sustain their interest by strengthening opportunities. Similarly, building affiliations with arts institutions would help nurture the talent available in tea gardens.



### **Granting statutory recognition to tea garden CPCs**

GoA has issued a notification for formation of Village Level Child Protection Committees (VLPCs) across the state under CPS. Work is

being done to advocate for a separate government notification for tea garden CPCs and to link them to the DCPUs.\* The ultimate aim of this effort is system strengthening and enabling convergent action at the district and tea garden levels in addressing child protection issues.



**We now need to focus on higher education for adolescents in tea gardens. Skilling is another area that needs focus. The adolescents in our gardens are so talented, they just need opportunities to shine!**



**Sandip Ghosh**

Secretary, Sustainability, ABITA



**Our work in tea gardens and its contribution to reducing the child marriage rate, especially among girls, is evident and should be scaled up and institutionalised within districts and monitored using district mechanisms. We are looking at COVID-responsive actions and at bringing in a greater focus on equity. We plan to work with smaller tea gardens and those in the Upper Assam area to bring those children to the focus of our programming. While we largely worked with adolescent girls' groups, we now want to understand how to mainstream positive masculinity and work with adolescent boys' groups and male facilitators.**

**Tea associations value the partnerships and technical inputs. Tea garden managers have become very alert and are keen to contribute to improving the environment in the tea gardens. It is heartening that along with a focus on workers' productivity, the tea industry understands that the productivity of the woman worker is linked to her own health nutrition and that of her children and family.**

**Given COVID-19, there is a need to work innovatively. In the next two years, we envisage an action plan derived from and focused on high prevalence districts with very high rates of child marriage. This will require inter-departmental convergence and actions from Department of Education, Department of Social Welfare, and Tea Tribe Welfare Department in terms of creating social protection schemes and an enabling environment so that girls stay in school and beyond school are then usefully employed.**



**Dr. Madhulika Jonathan**

Chief of Field Office, UNICEF Office for Assam and North Eastern States

\*Most tea gardens span several districts and hence their CPCs are at a higher level than the village. Therefore, an effort is being made to get separate recognition for tea garden CPCs under CPS.









**UNICEF Office for Assam and North Eastern States**

House No. 27, Basisthapur

Bylane No. 3, Adjacent to Regional Passport Office

Beltola, Guwahati 781028, Assam

Tel: +91 0361 2235151

+91 0361 2235153

Email: [guwahati@unicef.org](mailto:guwahati@unicef.org)