



Christian
World Service



Hope: Hungry for Fair Wages



When you first meet Rasu, you can see she is a hardworking woman. Her well-toned muscles and strong hands are used to lifting heavy loads and long days of toil. She supports her family by working as a tea picker on one of Sri Lanka's tea plantations and with what she can grow in her tiny garden. With better pay or a little more support, she may be able to escape the grim reality of daily poverty. Sometimes it only takes a little investment to start a small business.

"Greetings! My name is Rasu. I am 42 years old. I have studied up to A-Levels at school. I have three children and they are going to school now. My husband does not have a permanent job. He gets paid occasionally for his labour.

After schooling I started growing vegetables and took care of goats. But with frequent attacks from wild boars in recent times, I discontinued farming and started work on a tea estate."

One thing that has changed little since tea was first taken to Sri Lanka by the British, is the harvesting of tea. The most delicate tea grows on its mountain slopes and is picked by hand. Every seven to 14 days, the tea pickers walk between the bushes, deftly picking the new buds on its branches. Their goal is to fill the tarpaulin bags on their back with 18 kilograms of the highly prized leaves. During lockdown, they worked often without access to water or sanitation to maintain one of the country's leading exports.

Rasu says she picks tea when the leaves are ready. Normally she has work for 20 days a month but when growth is slow, for only 12 days. In the best months she earns around Rs 15,000 (NZ\$121.74) but her income can be as little as Rs 3,000 (NZ\$24.35). It is not enough to feed her family.



Two of Rasu's children wait outside their home, one in a row of linehouses built many years ago for teapickers. Sri Lanka's tea industry is built on the work they do for low wages. Plantation families are the poorest in the country.

But Rasu has hope. A while ago she attended a small business course on growing mushrooms. She started by selling them to other women who worked on the tea estate, but they could not always pay her. Instead she tried to sell them to local shops, but could not meet the high production standards required by local authorities. Fortunately the estate where she works allows residents to grow vegetables but some days they do not have enough to eat.

Rasu knows she can feed her family with a little more income. CWS partner MONLAR is campaigning for improved wages and better conditions for tea pickers and other plantation workers. It is a network of 47 local farmers' organisations and individuals working to regenerate the land and its people.

Support the 2020 Christmas Appeal like Rasu's to give hungry families good food and the basics of a sustainable life.

Sri Lanka's Plantation workers

Most are descendants of Tamil families brought from India to work on the coffee, rubber, coconut and tea plantations in the early nineteenth century. For more than a century, colonial estate owners profited from a cheap and compliant labour force that harvested the highest quality tea. When the government nationalised the industry in the 1970s, it sent 300,000 of these labourers back to India. Those remaining were only granted citizenship in 1978. Today almost 25% of estate workers do not have National Identity cards or birth and marriage certificates.

Estate workers are in the bottom tier of all socio-economic indicators except the rate of female employment. Women tend to pick the tea while men undertake the routine maintenance work to improve production. Many do not get enough to eat and their children are more likely to be hungry and miss school. 83% of families on the tea estates live in run-down line houses, 55% of them have access to clean water, mostly from a common tap or well, 23% have no toilets. Each estate manager decides if they can have land to garden – many do not – and chickens or other animals will often share the same room as the family.

You can read more about teapickers [here](#) or from the [BBC](#).

MONLAR

The Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform based in Sri Lanka has made food its business. By connecting farmers, labourers, agricultural experts, academics and activists, they are planting the seeds for an economy that is more sustainable and respectful of life. Meeting as local people's planning forums, members can share skills as well as seeds and advocate in the interests of small farmers who produce 70% of the world's food on less than one hectare of land.

MONLAR promotes regenerative or agro-ecological approaches based on locally produced inputs, multi-cropping and empowered farmers (especially women). They have pressured the Department of Agriculture to recognise the place of small farmers in the local food economy, more important during the Covid-19 pandemic when costly inputs are out of reach.



Dharmika can feed her family from her small plot, thanks to what she has learnt from MONLAR. "The garden is a big strength to me," she says. She started a group in her village and is now sharing the MONLAR approach with others.

MONLAR encourages members to learn from each other and campaign together on issues of common concern. For example, it is part of the 1000 Campaign pushing for plantation workers like Rasu to be paid Rs 1,000 (NZ \$8.11) a day. MONLAR has also highlighted the exploitative micro-finance model operating in Sri Lanka and is campaigning for the protection of the Muthurajawela marshlands, home of more than 400 distinct species of flora and fauna. Together members work to protect the rights and livelihood of everyone. Its vision is global and it links with other groups sharing their perspective.

MONLAR began in 1990 when farmer, non-governmental, and people's organisations met to discuss the serious socio-political and economic crises the country was facing. One of the founders was Devasarana, another CWS partner. CWS has supported MONLAR from its earliest days.

Dharmika [shares](#) her story to show how MONLAR has helped her feed her family during Covid-19.

Thanks to MONLAR for collecting this story and for the images.