

Conditions in the Tea Industry: Interview with Bob Tavener, CEO

Why are you doing this interview now?

There has been a fair bit of media coverage of the tea industry recently that has brought some issues into the public arena and it's important that we talk about these. These conversations are instrumental in raising awareness of challenges and issues in the sector and this is what's needed to encourage sustainable change and improvement. At Twinings, we recognise that change is needed and we are passionate and committed to doing whatever we can to help. We work with partner organisations across the tea industry on projects that are making a real difference to the lives of people living and working on tea estates. But sustainable change takes time.

Tell us about the tea industry.

Tea is a large, complex agricultural sector with a long history. Dating back over several thousand years it makes our 300 year old brand seem young! Tea is produced in more than 30 countries, and is often grown in remote and relatively poor regions. The sector employs millions of people across China, India, Kenya and Sri Lanka to name a few, with varied levels of scale, regulation and organisation - from smallholder plots of a few square metres cultivated by individuals or families, to tea estates that span hundreds of hectares managed by sizeable companies. Like most tea brands, Twinings doesn't own or operate any tea estates itself, and never has done. We buy from lots of different estates around the world. For those working on tea estates, it isn't just a job; whole families and communities can live on plantations so it's very much a way of life. Across the tea sector conditions inevitably vary and do sometimes leave a lot to be desired. This needs to change.

Is enough being done to improve conditions?

We are 100% committed to improving the lives of those living and working on tea estates and there is always more that needs to be done. The challenge that we have is influence. In India for example, over 80% of tea produced there is for the local Indian market and Twinings buy less than 1% of the total so it can be very hard to have much of a say in how things are done. Twinings cannot simply demand that conditions on tea estates be amended to meet its criteria, and expect change overnight; that's just not realistic. On the other hand, we do need to take every opportunity we can find, or create, to push for ever better conditions in the sector, and especially for those that work in it. To try and increase our influence, we work in collaboration with other tea companies as part of the Ethical Tea Partnership ('ETP') and we try to join forces with any other body, governmental department or NGO that shares our interests. We have a common goal of improving conditions in the tea industry and we feel that together we can get further in achieving that goal. We will continue in our efforts so that we can be confident that the people who work to make our tea are being treated well.

What was your reaction to the BBC programme concerning conditions in Assam last year?

We were really disappointed to see those examples of poor conditions that still exist, and we were shocked by some of the allegations. We immediately visited the estates, together with an independent assessor, to check for ourselves and decide what best to do.

One of the companies featured has, unfortunately, fallen short of the standards required for its Rainforest Alliance accreditation, and is therefore no longer a supplier of Twinings. The other company, in our view, is one of the more progressive producers; they have a strong programme to improve conditions, and we continue to support them through our work with the ETP and a separate Twinings project.

What's your opinion on certification?

We absolutely recognise the value of certification and most of the estates we buy from are certified. I think the likes of Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified and Fairtrade are a really positive influence. However, certification alone does not offer a guarantee, since it is only based on a selected sample at a point in time.

This is why we work through the ETP; not only to help producers towards achieving certification but also afterwards, to continue improving conditions.

Twinings also works directly with producers to help them address issues which may affect their workers, local communities or the environment.

What type of progress has been achieved through the work of ETP?

Besides its monitoring, ETP has been working on many initiatives; from promoting equal rights for women in tea factories in Kenya, and improving worker-management relationships on tea estates in Sri Lanka, to training tea workers to use agrochemicals safely.

ETP is also working to improve the earnings of tea growers. It is leading a project to increase wages in Malawi and training farmers in Indonesia, Kenya and Malawi to enhance their productivity.

Tell us more about the work you are doing directly as a company?

We work with partner organisations such as Mercy Corps, UNICEF, Save the Children, Care International, BSR, as well as producers and local governments, on long term programmes to help bring sustainable change on the ground and build stronger, healthier and more sustainable communities.

In Assam, a significant problem is that girls and young women living on tea estates are particularly at risk of potential health-related issues and may be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Since 2011, Twinings has been working with UNICEF and tea producers to improve the lives of girls on tea estates and create a protective environment where they can develop and thrive. During the first part of the project, we have already reached over 6,000 girls on 15 tea estates and we aim to reach 34,000 on 63 tea estates by 2017.

The programme addresses the prevalence of anaemia, which sadly affects the majority of girls. While treating it with the distribution of iron tablets, we are also working to prevent the condition through health and nutrition education, kitchen gardens, cooking demonstrations and health food shops. So far, we have seen a 14% reduction in anaemia levels, with a shift from severe and moderate to milder cases, and the proportion of girls chronically malnourished has reduced by a third.

The work with UNICEF, also builds and strengthens life skills, so girls are now better equipped to protect themselves and their peers from all forms of harm. 134 Adolescent Girls' Clubs have so far been set up with a membership of over 7,000 girls from 10 to 19 years old. More recently, we started forming child protection committees on each tea estate with representatives from the tea estate management, government, health workers and adolescent girls, to prevent, identify and remediate cases of child abuse.

What has been the impact of your work so far?

We have improved the health of over 6000 adolescent girls in Assam by controlling anaemia. Elsewhere in India, in participating communities in Darjeeling, we have achieved a 66% reduction in waterborne disease through our Water and Sanitation Programme, which led to a reduction in absenteeism by 73%. In China, where we work to improve the health of mothers and babies in remote tea communities, we have reached to 11,144 women in remote villages.

With all this good work, are the estates Twinings buy from better than others?

We buy from a large number of tea gardens and we have longstanding relationships with many, and our buyers/ blenders visit producers regularly. I think, because we are always seeking the highest quality teas, it's fair to say that the producers that supply Twinings are the best in the sector, and standards on these estates are likewise higher. However, we recognise that more work needs to be done. In addition to the projects I've mentioned we have our own people working on the ground in the main tea producing countries, evaluating conditions and working on improvement initiatives.

Would it help if Twinings owned their own tea estates?

This is a difficult one as we feel there is a very fine line between positive influence and inappropriate interference. Whilst we are experts in tea we do not claim to be experts in growing tea and we feel it is important to recognise and support the expertise of those whose communities have been growing it for centuries.

However, the fact that we do not own tea estates doesn't mean that we are less committed to improving conditions there.

Why don't you pay more for your tea in order for wages to rise instead of spending money on projects?

Paying more for our tea will not necessarily increase wages or improve conditions, depending on how the money is deployed by the producing company, whereas the project work we fund has a definite impact on living conditions on the ground.

Regarding wages, we are confident that people on tea estates are paid at least the minimum wage set by law or agreed in collective bargaining agreements, so while we recognize that wages may be low, it is very difficult for us to have a direct influence on them. Nonetheless we remain fully committed to working with local stakeholders, including governments and tea associations, to address this complex issue.

With all the complexity and challenge, what's your aim or vision about how to improve things?

We need the many examples of good progress to be recognised by others in the sector, leading to more widespread improvement.

I like to think that this could lead to a 'virtuous circle', as the estates with the best conditions also become increasingly productive, as buyers such as ourselves continue to support further improvements, and as consumers become increasingly interested in the conditions in locations where their tea is grown. A company like Twinings is a minnow in comparison to the size of the tea-growing sector so this probably seems like a lot to hope for, but we are committed to using the influence we do have to create better conditions. I am really optimistic, despite the many possible obstacles, because everyone from the tea-picker right the way through to the tea drinkers knows that this is 'the right thing to do'.