



## **Green Harvest:**

# **The Outgrower Tea Leaf Collection System in the Honde Valley, Zimbabwe**

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### **SESSION 1: AGRARIAN CONTRACTS**

## **DELIVERING LAND AND SECURING RURAL LIVELIHOODS: POST-INDEPENDENCE LAND REFORM AND RESETTLEMENT IN ZIMBABWE**

*Project website: <http://www.wisc.edu/ltc/zimpfl.html>*

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**March 2003**

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This output was made possible in part through support provided by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), under the terms of USAID/ZIMBABWE CA 690-A-00-99-00270-00.

The Land Tenure Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Centre for Applied Social Sciences, University of Zimbabwe provide technical assistance, training, capacity building, and research in support of Zimbabwe's Land Reform and Resettlement Program II.

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# **GREEN HARVEST: THE OUTGROWER TEA LEAF COLLECTION SYSTEM IN THE HONDE VALLEY, ZIMBABWE**

by

**J.P. Mtisi**

## **BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

Commercial tea production in Zimbabwe was started in the 1920s in Chipinge District by Tanganda Tea Company<sup>1</sup> which, for some 30 years, was the only tea company in the country until it was joined by South Down Holdings in Chipinge and, Eastern Highlands Plantations Ltd., and Aberfoyle Plantations in the (Honde Valley) Hauna District in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> In the late 1960s, TILCOR (now ARDA) started Katiyo Tea Estate also in the Honde Valley.<sup>3</sup> For a number of ideological and economic considerations, from the 1920s through the early 1960s, African participation in the tea industry in colonial Zimbabwe was only as workers on company-owned estates and not as direct producers of tea. However, partly influenced by developments in other parts of the tea growing world, especially Kenya and Malawi, and partly as a result of internal debates on the best land use patterns within the country itself, the colonial state started a tea outgrower scheme in the Honde Valley in the early 1960s. In March, 1964, it was reported that the “first tea ever grown by African farmers in Southern Rhodesia was plucked and delivered to a tea company factory in January ...”.<sup>4</sup> The company referred to was Eastern Highlands. The tea outgrower scheme spread to other districts in Manicaland and, by the late 1960s, Southdown Holdings and Tanganda Tea Company were

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<sup>1</sup> See [Rhodesia Tea Growers Association] - The Story of Rhodesia Tea: “Two leaves and a bud” N.D.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with D. Plowes, Mutare, April, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with J.G. Baxer, Mutare, 13/4/01.

<sup>4</sup> Outpost, March, 1964.

running outgrower projects in Chipinge District.<sup>5</sup> After independence, the Rusitu Valley Smallholder Tea Project was started in Chimanimani District.<sup>6</sup>

From the first four outgrowers in the early 1960s, there are now over 2000 in the Honde Valley alone. These are communal farmers, generally within a radius of some 40 km from the company plantations who have entered into contracts with tea companies to produce tea on their communal lands and sell it [green leaves] to the companies, who then process it into made tea which they sell in local, as well as international markets.

Referring to a ‘contract’ between the tea companies and the outgrowers gives the misleading impression that this is an agreement entered into by equal parties. This is certainly not the case; as the relationship is terribly skewed in favour of the companies. Although not exactly the same, the relationship between the outgrowers and the buyers approximates the proverbial “horse and rider” partnership.

The outgrowers in the Honde Valley do not have a wide choice of buyers; they can sell to either, or both, Eastern Highlands Plantations or ARDA-Katiyo. Their position in relation to the buyers of their tea is weak, partly a result of the characteristics of their produce. Tea is very perishable and the manufacturing process must start soon after plucking. This is a source of serious weakness on the part of the outgrowers. The biological characteristics of the produce, tea, does not give the outgrowers sufficient space (holding period) within which they can withhold selling while, for example, they negotiate for a better price. Another aspect of the crop is that producers have to observe plucking rounds, the frequency at which a tea bush is plucked. Depending on climate and weather, a tea bush should be plucked every 5 to 7 days. If this period is exceeded beyond a certain point, the leaves become too hard for processing into made tea, which means a loss to the producer. Again, in this case, the grower is limited as to the period during which he/she can hold out, even when the tea is still in the field, which weakens the grower’s bargaining power vis-à-vis the tea companies.

The majority of tea outgrowers depend on the tea companies, the buyers, for transport and agricultural inputs. Of course, they are forced to sell their tea to the tea companies because they do not have a factory of their own. Another important point to note with regards to the

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with T. Evers, Mutare, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> B. McDonald, The Tea Factor: Smallholder Tea Production in a Zimbabwean Communal Area, International Cooperation for Development (ICD), CIIR N.D.

tea outgrower arrangements in Zimbabwe is that the companies are not entirely dependent on the outgrowers for their supply of tea. Rather, they have their own estates from which they can get sufficient supply to feed their factories. We thus have a situation where the outgrowers need the tea companies, but the latter can do without the outgrower. This enables the companies to be arrogant and, sometimes, dictate terms to the outgrowers - on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

Based almost entirely on interviews with outgrowers and some company officials, this paper intends to examine the dynamics of leaf collection from the fields of the outgrowers to the factories owned by the tea companies in the Honde Valley. The collection of leaf from tea outgrowers has its basis in the contracts entered into between the growers and the tea companies. The tea buyers, Eastern Highlands and ARDA-Katiyo, are expected to provide transport to ferry outgrowers' green leaf from different parts of the Honde Valley to the factories.<sup>7</sup> The buyers also provide field clerks and assistants together with scales for weighing tea from growers who are not members of cooperatives<sup>8</sup> and who, therefore, sell their tea to the companies as individuals. The cooperatives do not get clerks and scales from tea buyers, but, instead, have their own. Nevertheless, they are provided with transport by the tea companies as is the case with the independent outgrowers.

The process of transferring green tea leaves from the outgrowers to the buyers' factories consists of a number of stages which can differ quite significantly depending on the buyer, and whether the outgrower sells his/her produce as an individual or as a member of a cooperative. Before the tractor comes to collect tea at prearranged sites, the outgrower has to carry his/her leaf from the field to the weighing point where he/she removes it from whatever container would have been used and spreads it on the ground to allow free circulation of air. It is very important that the leaf is constantly turned to make sure that it does not burn itself out while the grower waits for the tractor to arrive. Under sunny conditions, the leaf has to be kept under shade so that it does not get sun burnt.<sup>9</sup> The grower, therefore, has to constantly shift it to follow the shade if the tractor is delayed, as is usually the case, especially during the

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with informant 1, Honde Valley, January 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with informant 2, Hone Valley, January 2002. There are many outgrower (Marketing) co-operatives in the Honde Valley. However, there are still many growers who are not members of any cooperative and thus sell their tea as individuals.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Informant 3, Honde Valley, December 2000.

peak of the season. Meanwhile, the grower also removes old hard leaves, commonly known as “*mbanje*”, which would have accidentally been plucked, for it is very difficult to pluck tea that is totally free of these old leaves as plucking is usually done at great speed.<sup>10</sup>

The first thing that is done when the tractor arrives at a weighing point is the assessment of leaf to determine whether or not it is of acceptable quality. The clerk is responsible for checking the quality, and can either accept or reject the tea, depending on his judgement. When he is satisfied that the quality meets the minimum requirements, the leaf is weighed. This weighing process, as will be discussed below, is fraught with problems. The clerk records the weight of every grower’s tea. As soon as their tea is loaded onto the tractor, growers who are not members of cooperatives cease to be involved while those belonging to cooperatives continue to be involved through their clerk who goes together with the full tractor to the factory.

At the factory, the tractor, together with its load is weighed on a weighbridge. The weight of leaf determined at the weighbridge is then compared with the total weight recorded at the fields. The two figures rarely agree; the difference is what is called variance and can be either positive or negative. When the weight recorded at the field is greater than the factory one, the variance is said to be positive, and negative when it is otherwise.<sup>11</sup> The quality of leaf is assessed for a second time at the factory, and if it is below standard, the leaf is rejected. This however, is a rare occurrence.

## **TRANSPORT OF LEAF**

The contracts entered into between tea buyers and tea outgrowers make it an obligation on the part of the tea buyers to provide transport to growers. Transport is supposed to be provided on agreed days and times to different parts of the Honde Valley where tea is grown. For example, the contract between one of the tea companies and the outgrowers in part reads, “Leaf will be delivered [by the growers] to the collection point on the days and times specified by the management [of the company concerned] who will under no obligation accept leaf except on the days and times specified”.<sup>12</sup> The two buyers, Eastern Highlands and ARDA-Katiyo, provide transport at different times in the same areas. The buyers also provide

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Informant 4, Honde valley, December 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Informant 5, Honde Valley, 31 December 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Tea Growers Green Leaf Purchase Agreement.



transport on different days in different areas. In the peak period, for example, ARDA-Katiyo provides transport to Mhanda area on Tuesdays and Thursdays, whereas Eastern Highlands does so on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.<sup>13</sup> The frequency with which leaf is collected varies with season. During the rainy season, usually from November to March, Eastern Highlands provides transport about three times a week, while ARDA-Katiyo does so only twice a week.<sup>14</sup>

The collection of leaf is hampered by the poor road network in some areas. The Samutete and surrounding areas are among the most seriously affected by this problem.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the collection of leaf from these areas is very difficult. Growers have to travel very long distances, in some cases twelve kilometres, carrying leaf on their heads to the nearest collection points which tractors can access. Some growers use donkeys to carry the leaf to the weighing points.<sup>16</sup> The problem gets worse during the rainy season because donkeys cannot be used too frequently as they can develop wounds on their backs. This is at a time when they are needed most as tea shoots vigorously during the rainy season and production rises to a peak. Thus the only way leaf can be taken to the weighing points is by growers carrying it on their heads. However, a problem is that not much leaf can be carried using this method.

The poor road network has also discouraged many potential tea outgrowers from embarking on tea projects, and those who already grow tea find it difficult to expand their fields. According to one grower in the Nyanjereka area, the poor road system has kept his plan to expand his tea field at bay. As he put it: “In fact I have got a plan to build a compound for my workers. What is really stopping me is the road issue. Once a good road is established, I will start expanding my project”.<sup>17</sup> The problem of the non existence of roads in some areas has made it more difficult for growers to meet the quality standards demanded by buyers. According to one respondent, tea quality is affected mostly because growers carry their leaf on their heads over long distances, as a result some of the leaves are broken, and others constantly rub against each other, thereby affecting their freshness.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Informant 6, Honde Valley, December 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Informant 6, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Informant 7, Honde Valley, 2 January, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Informant 8, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Informant 9, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Informant 10, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

For growers whose tea fields are small or their plants are still very young, the transport that the buyers provide is adequate. Their production is low and they, therefore need transport twice, or sometimes only once a week. The situation is, however, different with bigger growers for whom transport provided by buyers is not adequate, given their big volumes of production. Indeed, one of them claimed he needs to have his own truck to ferry his leaf to the factory on a daily basis. Because of inadequate transport this grower's tea usually overgrows, especially during peak periods. The problem of inadequate transport became worse during the year 2000 because of the fuel crisis that hit the country. The buyers could not get sufficient fuel to enable them to send out tractors to outgrowers as usual, and they had to cut the number of days they were collecting leaf from outgrowers from three or two a week to only one.

Growers face a number of problems when there is inadequate transport. First, they may have to find their own private means of transport and this costs them money. Second, inadequate transport results in leaf not being plucked on some days and it thus overgrows, as a result of which the grower loses because instead of it being sold the leaf remains in the field. One grower added that when, as a result of inadequate transport, tea overgrows the quality deteriorates because the leaves become harder which means more fibre; it also becomes difficult to pluck.<sup>19</sup> The above suggests that the contracts between the outgrowers and buyers favours the latter as the growers appear to bear all the risks while the buyers risk nothing.

There are, however, some growers who are located close to buyers' estates. These are less affected by transport shortages. If there is no transport provided, they pluck their tea and take it to the buyers' plantations where company employees will be working. These growers can pluck their leaf anytime they want regardless of whether or not the buyers are providing transport to outgrowers on that day.<sup>20</sup> What this means is that the proximity of a grower to a particular buyer also affects his/her choice of a buyer. One respondent said he chose to sell to ARDA-Katiyo because he is close to its plantations thereby enabling him to sell his leaf almost anytime he wants. Growers in Mapokana said that at times they sell their leaf to Eastern Highlands, not because this buyer is their first choice but because they are able to pluck their tea when no buyer provides transport to them and take it to Eastern Highlands

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Informant 6, Honde Valley, December, 2001. See also Interview with Informant 12, Honde Valley, January 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Informant 13, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

estates nearby. When they get there the buyer's clerk weighs their leaf and when the buyer's leaf is taken to the factory, theirs is taken at the same time.<sup>21</sup>

According to many growers, Eastern Highlands' transport service is much more efficient than ARDA's. There are two tractors from Eastern Highlands that go out to collect outgrowers' leaf. On the other hand, ARDA provides only one tractor to outgrowers. As a result, Eastern Highlands usually collects all the leaf from outgrowers in time whereas ARDA may not be able to do so until the following day. Perhaps with a bit of exaggeration, a grower commented:

Eastern Highlands' transport service is wonderful. They always make sure that tea is ferried to the factory while it is still fresh. With ARDA Katiyo, transport service is poor because they have one tractor that serves outgrowers, and it is not enough. The [Katiyo] workers refuse to work late in the evening because they say they are not paid for overtime.<sup>22</sup>

The issue of transport service has, therefore, also tended to affect choice of buyer. Growers find themselves not selling to ARDA because the latter's transport is not reliable. In December, 2000, one grower said he preferred selling his leaf to ARDA which, at that time, was paying a higher price of \$6.40 per kg of green leaf whilst Eastern Highlands was offering a mere \$3.65 per kg. However, this grower often ended up selling to Eastern Highlands because ARDA did not supply sufficient transport.<sup>23</sup>

The times at which leaf is collected from outgrowers are stated in the contracts and vary from place to place, and also according to the buyer. In Mapokana, for example, the ARDA-Katiyo provides transport around eleven in the morning while Eastern Highlands does so in the same area around three in the afternoon. Notwithstanding what is stated in the contract, in reality, leaf collection times are not strictly adhered to, especially in the peak season during which time the buyers often change their pick-up times. In Mapokana, for example, growers have complained bitterly about the time ARDA provides transport in their area, pointing out that ARDA's tractor comes too early, around ten o'clock in the morning, at which time the growers would have plucked very little tea, and they are thus forced to leave most of it in the

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Informant 6, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Informant 14, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Informant 15, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

fields.<sup>24</sup> According to one outgrower in Mapokana, “Eastern Highlands is better on transport because it gives us time to pluck our tea, and it comes around 3 p.m. Katiyo comes too early; sometimes around 10 am, it will have come already... we will not have done much in the field”.<sup>25</sup>

When buyers provide transport too early growers usually have problems in securing labour, with the latter arguing that they cannot afford to work for just a few hours and be dismissed around ten ‘o’ clock in the morning when the buyer comes to collect leaf. As a result, most labourers end up preferring to work on the buyers’ estates where they can work for the whole day and get more money. On the other hand, some growers complained that buyers provide transport only once per day and by the time the tractors come in the late afternoon or evening the leaf will have lost weight. According to some outgrowers, the buyers give first preference to their estates when it comes to transport. As one of them put it: “We do not have our own transport so ... the company can tell us that, ‘our vehicles are busy at the moment’, and they send a tractor at 2.30 am. The tea will have deteriorated badly”.<sup>26</sup>

Commenting on the same issue, an official of one of the outgrower cooperatives stated:

When we first went there to make transport arrangements, they [the company] gave us the regulation [Mutemo] that they would be providing transport around 11.00 am, 12 to 1 p.m. However, in practice, sometimes the tractor comes around 9 p.m., and people will be waiting for it ... The tractor first of all ferries tea from the [buyer’s] estates before it is sent out here to outgrowers<sup>27</sup>

This is very inconvenient and costly not only to the growers but also to their workers who have to wait for the tractor to come so that they can weigh and find how much tea they have plucked as they are paid by weight. Even when growers allow their workers to dismiss and go home and then remain and do all the weighing, the workers may not be certain whether the growers would have been faithful about weight of the tea or would have cheated them in order to pay them less. What happens at times when buyers delay in coming to collect leaf is that some growers who have their own scales or who can borrow them from other growers

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Informant 16, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Informant 18, Honde Valley, January, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Informant 6, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Informant 17, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

weigh the leaf that would have been plucked by their workers to let them go home. However, the problem that growers face as a result of this is that when transport finally comes, the leaf will have lost a lot of weight and they would have to pay for more kgs to their workers than they would be paid by the buyers.

This is the problem one outgrower faced in December, 2000. On one day, he hired workers who plucked a total of about 200 kgs of leaf. ARDA did not send their tractor in time and the outgrower borrowed a scale and weighed the green leaf that his workers had plucked and allowed them to dismiss. Unfortunately, the tractor only came the following morning, by which time the leaf had not only lost a lot of weight but, even worse, some of it had burnt itself out during the night, turning brown completely. The grower had to throw it away since the clerks would not accept it. When the tractor came, the leaf weighed some 20 kgs less than it had weighed the previous day because of transpiration and because some of it had gone bad. This was in spite of the fact that the grower had plucked a little more leaf early in the morning and mixed it with that which had been plucked the previous day to improve its appearance.<sup>28</sup> Commenting on the transport issue and speaking on behalf of growers in his area, one outgrower angrily complained: “They come only once per day so that if they come in the afternoon, the tea will have lost a lot of weight due to exposure to the sun. And if it gets sun burnt, they no longer accept it”.<sup>29</sup>

## **LEAF WEIGHING AND QUALITY INSPECTION**

There are numerous weighing points located along roads throughout the tea growing areas in Honde Valley. It is at these weighing stations that the weighing of outgrowers’ tea usually takes place. In the past, growers had to find their own transport to ferry their tea to Eastern Highlands.<sup>30</sup> This was unlike the case with ARDA- Katiyo, which has provided transport to growers since the beginning of the tea outgrower scheme in the 1960s.<sup>31</sup>

All outgrowers who sold to Eastern Highlands in the early days had their tea weighed at the factory. They encountered many problems. For instance, some of them had to carry tea on their heads for several kilometres since they had no better means of transport. Also, the

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Informant 18, Honde Valley, January 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Informant 19, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Informant 13, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

weighing of tea was a long process during those days. According to one grower, those who assessed the quality at the factory were very strict. A grower could spend the whole night at the factory, sorting what was considered to be bad quality leaf. This usually resulted in conflicts between growers and clerks who were responsible for assessing quality. Growers queued up to have their tea weighed, and some of the clerks favoured growers who were known to them; and this was another major source of conflict.<sup>32</sup> The clerks, it is alleged, were so rude that normally growers would not dare oppose them on any matter. Stated one grower, “If you complained why they were giving first preference to growers who were known to them, they would punish you by ordering you to continue grading your tea alleging that it was yet to reach the required quality standard”.<sup>33</sup> A number of these clerks earned themselves nicknames because of their behaviour.

Generally speaking, tea outgrowers are responsible for deciding which place along the roads they want to designate as weighing points. Growers within a particular area agree on which place is appropriate for weighing their leaf, and there are usually no conflicts over this as the appropriate place is, in most cases, obvious. In some cases, however, growers disagree over the location of weighing points. According to one respondent, growers in the area where she stays, at one time, failed to agree on which place should be a weighing point, some growers arguing that the proposed place was further away from their fields than it was from others.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, some weighing points are far away from the fields of some growers. This problem is especially pronounced in areas where the road network is very poor. According to one grower, the nearest weighing point is some 12 km from her field. She has to carry her leaf over such distances on her head and, at times, she uses donkeys.<sup>35</sup>

At some weighing points there are structures, shades, under which the tea is stored before weighing takes place, but most of the weighing stations do not have such facilities. They simply have two vertical poles and a third one across where scales are tied when weighing takes place. The structures are very important because that is where leaf is kept to prevent the sun from burning it. In addition, when it is rainy the shades keep the leaf, as well as the

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Informant 20, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Informant 21, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Informant 22, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Informant 23, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

growers, from the rain while they wait for the arrival of the tractor, which at times is as late as midnight or later.

Tea quality assessment is carried out by a field clerk who looks at a number of things before he/she arrives at a decision about whether to accept or reject the leaf. These include leaf freshness, length of branches, presence of old hard and broken leaves.<sup>36</sup> The leaf has to be fresh in order for the clerk to accept it which makes it imperative for growers to sell their leaf on the very day that it is plucked. But selling the tea on the day it is plucked does not on its own provide a guarantee to outgrowers that their leaf will be accepted on the basis of freshness, for it can quickly lose that freshness within a few hours if kept under inhospitable conditions. To remain fresh, the leaf should not be heaped or kept in a closed container. If kept under such conditions, it burns itself out and turns brown and is, therefore, unacceptable as buyers only accept leaf that is fresh and green.<sup>37</sup>

The clerks also look at the branches to see if they are of the recommended length. The buyers require only the two youngest leaves and a bud. This is what is called “2½” or “2 and a bud”, in the tea trade. When the branches are longer than 2½, the clerk may order the grower to remove the bottom part of the branch to remain with 2½ or reject the leaf outright.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, many growers have had their tea rejected and thrown away because of failure to abide by the 2½ quality standard. The contract is very explicit on leaf quality and an outgrower may face a penalty for not abiding by the requirement. It states: “The standard of leaf required is ... two leaves and a bud in good condition and management reserve the right to reject leaf below the required standard or considered to be in poor condition”.<sup>39</sup> The two tea buyers, Eastern Highlands and ARDA, differ quite significantly on their emphasis on quality. ARDA is far stricter when it comes to length of branch than Eastern Highlands. As one grower put it: “But then ARDA’s problem is that they mostly want two and a bud. Eastern Highlands are not too specific on this. So that is the other reason why some people prefer [to sell to] Eastern Highlands”.<sup>40</sup> The buyers are stricter about leaf quality during the rainy season when there is usually a lot of leaf from the outgrowers. This is in sharp contrast to their attitude in the off-

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Informant 24, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Tea Grower Green Leaf Purchase Agreement..

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Informant 25, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Informant 26, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Informant 27, Honde Valley, January 20001.

peak season, usually in winter, when buyers may accept three leaves instead of the 2½ that they usually advocate for because tea does not shoot vigorously during that time and there is, therefore, very little leaf.<sup>41</sup>

As plucking takes place, some old leaves are accidentally picked since the process takes place at tremendous speeds. The clerks do not weigh growers' leaf if they observe the presence of these old leaves, commonly referred to as "*mbanje*" (marijuana) for they are considered an impurity. The presence of these old leaves negatively affects the quality of made tea and, if leaf is processed in spite of them, a lot of fibre is produced which, according to buyers, means more losses and less profits.<sup>42</sup> Also, for the tea to be of acceptable quality in the eyes of buyers the leaves have to be intact. The contracts stipulate that the leaves should not be broken and that if a grower brings such leaves, the buyer is at liberty to reject them. What usually causes the breaking of leaf is the fact that some growers carry the leaf on their heads over long distances to weighing points.<sup>43</sup>

When the clerk is satisfied that the leaf is of good quality, weighing then takes place. In some cases, the buyer brings sacks into which the leaf is put before it is weighed. These sacks are made of thin plastic-like material that is very light, and have numerous holes that are some three centimetres in diameter which allow free circulation of air in the sack so that the leaf inside remains fresh. In other cases, growers have to use their own containers. This is especially the case with Eastern Highlands which does not provide sacks for the purpose of weighing leaf. The sacks brought by growers vary in their type and size; some are quite thin and light whilst others are thick and heavy. According to some respondents, a large sack can weigh up to as much as one kg, and the buyer subtracts 1kg from the weight of leaf each time a sack full of tea is weighed to cater for the weight of the container.<sup>44</sup> The problem arises when a grower brings a sack which does not weigh as much as one kg. The clerk still subtracts one kg from the weight in spite of the sack being of less weight and, in such cases, the grower loses.

Honde Valley Zindi Cooperative sell their tea to Eastern Highlands who do not provide them with containers for weighing. They use weighing sheets which weigh between two and three

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Informant 28, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Informant 6, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Informant 29, Honde Valley, January, 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Informant 30, Honde Valley, December 2001.



kgs; in the rain, these weighing sheets can weigh up to five kgs.<sup>45</sup> To deal with the weight of such containers so that it does not affect the weight of leaf, the clerk adjusts the scale such that it starts at a point behind the zero mark. In cases where the buyers do not provide containers that are used for weighing and growers use their own, they later have to empty the leaf into box-like wire containers that are carried on the tractor.<sup>46</sup>

Some of the scales used for weighing the leaf belong to outgrowers whilst others are owned by tea buyers. Growers who sell leaf through cooperatives have their scales as cooperatives, and those who sell otherwise are provided scales by the buyers. According to the clerk of one cooperative, a scale can be faulty and it is important to check if it is working properly each day before it is used. He added that to minimise the likelihood of the scale showing inaccurate figures, the scales have to be sent for servicing. The problem with growers' cooperatives is that they normally do not engage the services of specialists to service their scales. It is the field clerks for these cooperatives who do the servicing, in some cases, in spite of their limited knowledge and experience with these scales. As a clerk of a cooperative stressed: "Scales are a problem; we don't send them for servicing. When the scale is not working properly, I do the repairing."<sup>47</sup> He claimed that everytime before he goes out to the fields to weigh growers' tea, he checks if the scale is in good order by taking an object with a known weight and putting it on the scale.

The fact that a scale can, as a result of a fault, show a lesser weight than it really is supposed to, creates room for some clerks to connive with some growers and record for them more kilograms than they are entitled to. The clerks can put aside the difference each time a bag of tea is weighed and then put up the total when weighing is complete. The difference is not difficult to tell since they would have tested the scales before leaving for the fields and can calculate what percentage of the true weight the difference is. Using percentages, the clerks can calculate that difference by using the total number of kgs for the day. Indeed, many clerks have been fired from their jobs after being caught conniving with some outgrowers and recording more kgs for them in secret arrangements.<sup>48</sup> One grower complained, "They [the

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Informant 18, Honde Valley, January, 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Informant 31, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Informant 33, Honde Valley, January, 2002.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Informant 22, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

buyers] will always trick us. As long as they bring their faulty machines the kgs won't come out right".<sup>49</sup>

Normally, before a load is mounted onto the scale, its pointer should be at position zero, which is the starting point. This is, however, not always the case when outgrowers' tea is weighed. The clerks can adjust the scale and move the pointer either to the left or to the right of the zero mark. When the pointer is behind the zero mark, the effect will be that each time weighing takes place, the scale shows a weight that is less than the correct one, and, of course, the grower loses. One grower stated that at times the buyers' clerk tune down the scale to behind zero, where there are no numbers at all.<sup>50</sup> In that case, a number of kilograms have to be 'lost' to bring the pointer up to zero before it starts recording the weight, a situation which obviously shortchanges the grower.

The tuning of scales was much more prevalent before growers formed cooperatives. Indeed, at times the scale would be adjusted so that the pointer would start at the 100 kg mark. This, according to one grower, was one of the reasons why growers decided to weigh their leaf on their own as a cooperative.<sup>51</sup> In some cases, the scales are tuned in such a way that the pointers move backwards. In that case, the pointer is placed at the 50kg mark before any load is mounted; and when loaded, the pointer moves backwards down to point zero, and the weight is arrived at by subtracting the number where the pointer will be indicating when a load is suspended from 50. This is more complicated since the actual weight is arrived at by subtracting figures and mistakes are bound to be made. It also leaves room for clerks to take advantage of some growers who are unable to do subtractions.

The clerk is responsible for reading figures on the scale and entering them into a book. The growers also look at the scale to make sure that the figures that the clerk writes down are the correct ones as reflected on the scale. One respondent said the growers have to be very alert because sometimes the clerks understate the figures.<sup>52</sup> When reading the scale, fractions are not included. If, for example, the scale reads 50.5kgs or 50.7kg, the clerk simply writes down 50kgs. This means the grower is not paid for those fractions, and the buyer takes them for free in the case of growers who do not sell as cooperatives. For those who sell through

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Informant 3, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Informant 34, Honde Valley, January 2002.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Informant 5, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Informant 39, Honde Valley, January, 2002.

cooperatives, the fractions may contribute towards a positive variance and the cooperative benefits from it. The fractions that are ignored may be so many that at the end of the day, they may add to hundreds of kgs. One grower may, for example, mount leaf onto the scale about four or five times.

When there is rain, the clerk does not simply write down the number that the scale indicates; 7½% is subtracted from the weight as water loss.<sup>53</sup> The buyers argue that leaf becomes heavier than it is supposed to be when it is rainy. This is caused by the obvious fact that it traps some moisture that is capable of materially affecting the weight and therefore a certain percentage has to be subtracted to get rid of the weight of the moisture. This, of course, makes sense, but the only question that may arise is whether the percentage is fair or it is too high, given the true weight of the moisture.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, asked how the buyers know the correct weight of moisture, one outgrower replied: “That is where the trickery is. There is trickery there”.<sup>55</sup>

A number of tricks and, at times, fraudulent activities take place during the leaf collection process. Growers have their own tricks that they employ in order to increase the weight of their tea. On the other hand, buyers and/or clerks also engage in fraudulent activities to try and get some monetary benefits. In response to various devious tactics engaged by their buyers or the latter’s representatives (the clerks), some growers include some objects in their tea during weighing. The most commonly used objects are stones, and when this is done successfully, the grower scores more kgs than the actual weight of his/her leaf. According to some respondents, there was a grower who put a stone which weighed some 20 kgs in his leaf during weighing; it was only discovered at the factory and hence it was never known who had done that.<sup>56</sup> To deal with this situation, the buyer subtracted an equal fraction from all the growers whose tea had been part of that consignment. According to a number of respondents, outgrowers employ these tricks simply because they want money; itself, a veiled commentary on the prices they are paid for their tea. Asked about the practice, one grower had this to say:

Yes; that happens very often. One plucks their tea and puts a stone in that tea to make it heavier. People want money, which is why they do that. That happened

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Informant 35, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

<sup>54</sup> Among others - Interviews with Informants 3, 6, 31, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Informant 36, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Informant 24, Honde Valley, January, 2002.

one time when a stone ... passed through the weighing stage and into the factory. It was only when the tea was being off-loaded to be processed ... that the stone struck one worker and so it was detected. From then on, it was a requirement that one [every plucker] has to pour out their tea so that it is inspected.<sup>57</sup>

Another trick that growers engage in is sprinkling water onto their leaf so that it gains weight. The buyers have since discouraged this, and constantly warn that they may refuse to buy the tea should anybody be found doing it.<sup>58</sup> Some growers, however, sprinkle water on their leaf in good faith. They do it especially on hot days to prevent their leaf from losing too much moisture and thus keep it fresh. According to a former clerk of a cooperative, the trick that growers most frequently use it to weigh their leaf twice. After weighing leaf for the first time, the grower checks if the clerk is paying attention. If the latter is busy, the grower can stealthily take his/her sack back to the weighing queue and then have it weighed for the second time. This usually happens at night, especially during the peak season when the tractors delay and come as late as midnight.<sup>59</sup> The trick is more commonly employed by growers who are not members of cooperatives for the latter guard against such practices among themselves because they haunt them when they result in negative variances when tea is weighed again at the factory. According to an official of a cooperative, members of cooperatives agreed among themselves to identify and report anybody who is found engaging in any tricks that are likely to negatively affect the cooperative.<sup>60</sup>

Field clerks also engage in tricks that prejudice growers. The tightening of scales has already been referred to, resulting in the understating of the weight of outgrowers' tea.<sup>61</sup> It appears the problem of scale tightening mostly affects growers who do not sell their leaf through cooperatives. This is because they hardly have control over company clerks and cannot tell them with impunity to correct scales. But members of cooperatives have some degree of control over their clerks since they are the ones who employ them, and if a clerk does anything they think is irregular, they can always report this to the cooperative committee to have the issue investigated.

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Informant 35, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Informant 27, Honde Valley, January, 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Informant 36, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Informant 6, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Informant 37, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

Many growers said there are some clerks who understate the weight of tea for some outgrowers and then credit it to a particular grower in secret agreements. On this issue, one grower complained,

The major problem that we are facing these days concerns clerks who fleece off some of our kgs and add them onto other growers' records. Sometimes they simply understate your kgs and keep the difference. They give that to their own friends, who give the owner [clerk] some of the payment after selling.<sup>62</sup>

Relations between growers and clerks vary depending usually on whether the clerk is employed by a cooperative or by a buyer. Clerks who are employed by growers are usually more friendly than those who work for the buyers. A clerk employed by one of the cooperatives said that in order to maintain good relations with growers, at times he has to accept leaf that is of a quality standard that company clerks would normally reject.<sup>63</sup> He covers it up with good quality leaf. On the other hand, one grower complained that buyers' clerks are very rude. As he put it, "[They] are not humble in their dealing with growers. If you try to oppose them on any matter, they will just leave your tea."<sup>64</sup> But some clerks are more considerate than others. Stated one grower:

... but a lot depends on the heart [leniency] of the clerk. One [clerk] may tell you to grade your tea so that when it mixes with that from other farmers [outgrowers], it gets neutralised, at least. However, those who are hard-hearted simply look at your tea and tell you ... 'Your tea is bad. I will not take it'. Even if you protest that it is not different from that of other outgrowers, they will not listen.<sup>65</sup>

Another grower added that, at times, it is necessary for growers to befriend clerks so that they are treated accordingly when it comes to grading and scaling of their tea. Indeed, some respondents claim that clerks occasionally demand bribes from growers lest such growers' tea would not be passed.<sup>66</sup> At times quarrels between clerks and growers arise, especially when the latter's leaf is rejected allegedly because of poor quality. According to an informant, some

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Informant 36, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Informants 6, 8 and 10, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Informant 37, Honde Valley, December, 2000.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Informant 38, Honde Valley, January, 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Informant 11, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

growers' tea is rejected in spite of it being of good quality, and yet the buyers, in their own tea estates accept tea that is much worse in terms of quality than that which they reject from outgrowers.<sup>67</sup>

According to an official of one of the cooperatives, women are more vulnerable to ill treatment by clerks. If there are only women at a weighing point, a lot of leaf is rejected because of alleged poor quality. He went further to say clerks are ruder in the absence of cooperative committee members, but when the latter are present, the weighing process is conducted much more fairly. He stated:

If they [the clerks] hate you, they may tell you that your tea is of poor quality and you have to select to remove the leaves that they say are not suitable. In other cases, they accept tea that is exactly the same as that which they would have rejected from another grower... This is the problem we are working to eliminate in our cooperative.<sup>68</sup>

## **LEAF AT THE FACTORY**

When the weighing process is through at a weighing station, the tea is taken to the factory where it is weighed for the second time. The difference that lies between weighing that takes place at the fields and that which takes place at the factory is that in the former, each individual grower weighs his/her leaf separately whereas in the latter, the tea is anonymous; all the leaf on the tractor is weighed in bulk on a weighbridge.

Growers who sell their leaf as individuals, as opposed to those who sell through cooperatives, are not affected by the outcome of the weighbridge weight. Whether the outcome produces a negative or positive variance makes no difference to them; they are still paid accordingly to their number of kgs recorded at the fields. On the other hand, growers who are members of cooperatives and sell their leaf through them are always affected by the factory weight in that when there is a positive variance, the excess money goes into the coffers of their cooperative, and they may later use it to buy fertilisers or seedlings. When there is a negative variance, the cooperative's financial resources may be negatively affected to the extent that members will have to contribute money to save the situation.

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Informant 38, Honde Valley, January 2002.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Informant 40, Honde Valley, January, 2002.

Before leaf is weighed at the factory, its quality is assessed. With ARDA-Katiyo, the leaf almost always meets the minimum requirements at the factory. However, there have been a few cases when the leaf fails to meet the required quality standard, in which case it is thrown away and growers are not paid for it. A clerk of one of the cooperatives stated that at one time, in the past, a whole tractor consignment of tea weighing 2900kgs was rejected and thrown away, and growers were not paid because the quality was considered spoor.<sup>69</sup>

Unlike ARDA-Katiyo in mid 2001, Eastern Highlands Plantations introduced a new system of evaluating leaf quality (in bulk) at the factory. The quality was expressed in percentages (premiums) which were paid for differently. When a consignment arrived at the factory, 100 grams of tea was picked at random from the lot. From this sample, acceptable (good) leaves were separated from the bad ones. The weight of the good tea was then expressed as a percentage (fraction) of the sample; that was taken to represent the quality (percentage) of the whole consignment and thus the corresponding price per kg.

Explaining the system, the clerk of one of the cooperatives stated:

They [the clerks at the factory] take an amount of tea from any sack in the trailer, at random, and put it there. They measure it to 100 grams - that represents the tea from that particular area. They then assess that lot, looking for the type of tea they require, which is 2½. They pick out the good leaves and put them aside, and they do the same with the bad leaves. They take the “broken tea”, and also what they call ‘hard mbanje’. They then weigh the good quality tea to find its percentage of the 100 grams. If it measures to 70 grams, then your percentage is 70%. The separation will tell you what is wrong with your tea on any particular day - whether there is too much mbanje, whether it is too long or crushed.<sup>70</sup>

Indicated on the ‘green leaf percentage assessment’ form are points which evaluating clerks at the factory are expected to take particular note of. One such reminder, for example, reads:

The required standard [quality] is one in which the minimum percentage of clean undamaged two and a bud, three and a bud, and soft two leaf bhanji 80%. No shoot should exceed in length, measured from the base of the bud - 11 cm.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with Informant 41, Honde Valley, January, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Informant 36, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

<sup>71</sup> Papers in Private Anonymous Hands. Green Leaf Count Form.

Another instruction simply reads: “Particular note should be made of over-heated or burnt leaf”.

Below is an edited “green leaf count” form which gives an indication of how percentages were arrived at:

**Leaf Count Form, Outgrowers Division**

		% NCN STANDARD					STANDARD		
TIME IN	FIELD NO.	OVER 11 CM	BROKEN &/OR DAMAGED	4 PLUS A BUD	HARD BHANJI	TOTAL	% GOOD	IMM	SHOOT COUNT
17.10	O/G	-	17	7	12	36	64	-	88
19.00	O/G	3	13	6	19	41	59	-	78
		1	15	6	16	38	62	-	83
19.00	O/G	-	25	3	10	38	62	-	96
AVERAGE		-	25	3	10	38	62	-	96

Source: Papers in Private Anonymous Hands. Green Leaf Count Form.



As already stated, different percentages were paid for at different prices as follows:

### Quality Premiums

PERCENTAGE	PRICE/KG
Below 50%	\$5.26
50 - 54%	\$6,13
55 -59%	\$7.01
60 - 64%	\$7.88
65 - 69%	\$8.76
70 - 74%	\$9.64
75 - 80%	\$10.51
81 - 100%	\$11.57

Source: Interview with a clerk of one of the cooperatives, Honde Valley, January, 2002.

This system was very unpopular with the out-growers in the Honde Valley. It used the collective responsibility approach which was not always fair. In the event that one grower's tea in a particular consignment was of poor quality, the whole consignment was negatively affected if the sample was picked from his/her tea. On this issue, one respondent had this to say:

[The] disadvantage with Eastern Highlands is that growers' tea is mixed which means that those people who have poor quality tea spoil other people's good quality tea. At the factory, that tea may be judged to be of poor quality yet others would have worked hard to pick good quality tea.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, theoretically, the system could also work in favour of outgrowers if the sample was picked from a very high quality tea when, in fact, the consignment, as a whole, was of poor quality. However, in most cases, the outgrowers are on the wrong side of luck as their tea rarely scored above 65%.

Another problem with this system was that outgrowers who employed pluckers paid them per weight of plucked tea and the wage was negotiated before the work was done. In other words, the workers demanded to know their wages in advance, but the outgrowers had no way of

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Informant 36, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

knowing the monetary value of their tea in advance. Complaining about this system, one respondent stated:

We are not happy with being paid for our tea according to the percentage scale. This system irks us because you can pluck a lot of tea but at the end, you get less money to the extent that you cannot pay your workers. My tea can be said to be 50 percent which means that I will get \$5.26 [per kg] and yet I will have to pay my workers \$3.00 [per kg] - which is a great loss ...<sup>73</sup>

After the quality assessment exercise at the factory, the tea is then weighed and the result, as already stated, could be a negative or positive variance. There are a number of reasons that cause variances. A positive variance arises mostly because fractions of kgs that are ignored at the fields are taken into account at the factory. The fractions will be so numerous that when added together, they total several kgs. This is where growers who sell as individuals loose out because they are never paid for these fractions. Another reason for positive variance is that when reading the scales at night, the clerk may not be able to see properly and thus write down a figure that is less. The other reason why positive variances arise is because the scale may be adjusted to start behind the zero mark. This, it is claimed, is to cater for the weight of containers, but the adjustment may be a bit too excessive such that more weight is disregarded than is actually supposed to be.

Negative variances are caused, in some cases, by the fact that leaf may loose weight before it gets to the factory, especially when it is very hot. The moisture transpires to the extent of offsetting the effect of fractions when they combine at the weighbridge. Some growers weigh their leaf twice in an effort to have more kgs recorded for themselves. This usually happens under the cover of darkness at night when tractors are delayed. Inaccurate reading of the scale at night may also result in negative variances. An informant had this to say, "The problem is that, at times, the tractor comes late in the evening when it is dark. In that case, it may not be possible to clearly see the numbers on the scale and a 20 may appear like a 30, for example."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Informant 38, Honde Valley, January 2002.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Informant 14, Honde Valley, December, 2001.

## CONCLUSION

The tea outgrower scheme in Manicaland in general, and the Honde Valley in particular, is expanding rapidly. With the worsening unemployment situation in the country, more and more people who have access to land in areas suitable for tea growing are likely to make efforts to join the scheme. The irony is that this expansion, at least in the Honde Valley, is taking place notwithstanding some bitter complaints from the outgrowers regarding their relationship with the tea companies. Despite this seeming contradiction, it is clear that the tea outgrower arrangement needs to be attended to; it is fraught with problems. The contracts that are “signed” between the growers and the tea companies are clearly one sided. While the companies can breach them with impunity, the outgrowers cannot do so. With regards to transport, for example, the companies are supposed to collect tea from the outgrowers at certain agreed times. But very often they do not abide by this clause, at times sending transport so late that the tea quality will have deteriorated. Although responsible for this deterioration, the companies very often reject the tea on grounds of poor quality; thus punishing the outgrowers for their (companies) own failures. Further, the growers are also unfairly treated in the way their tea is weighed. Scales are tampered with in all sorts of ways, some of which are sanctioned by the companies and others are perpetrated by the clerks for their own benefit, and fractions are rounded down. The question that arises is: Is there a way forward? The answer, however guarded, seems to be yes.

On the basis of the latest developments, the situation appears to not be entirely bleak. There does seem to be a ray of hope. The outgrowers in the Honde Valley have come together and formed the Honde Valley Tea Growers Union. Hopefully, this will enhance the growers’ position vis-à-vis the tea companies. Already there are indications in that direction. At a meeting in July, 2002, between the Honde Valley Tea Growers Union and the representatives of Eastern Highlands Plantations, the latter indicated that they were prepared to assist the outgrowers with money to the tune of Z\$50 million which the outgrowers would use to form a company. The proposal is that this company would be responsible for selling outgrowers’ leaf.

Apart from the Z\$50 million aid to develop the outgrower scheme in the Honde Valley, Eastern Highlands also indicated that they would introduce 10,000 shares at \$5.00 each, open to all outgrowers who are members of the tea outgrowers’ union. Further, the company also indicated its intention to build and maintain roads in the tea growing areas to facilitate the

collection of green leaf from the outgrowers. This could be the dawn of a new era in the development of the tea outgrower scheme in the Honde Valley.