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## 'All over India the tea industry is keeling over'

Mari Thekaekara

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Fair trade was brilliant for its time. Instead of charity for developing countries, it called for justice. The word "fair" brought out the unpalatable fact that trade was unfair, that the rules were exploitative and ugly, and that colonialism hadn't really gone away. It merely had a newly made-up face. It's now so cool to have fair trade that even Nestlé has grabbed the brand and is cashing in on it.

So what's the next logical step? Can we allow Fair trade to be usurped? Multinationals all over the world are now tossing around phrases that make them sound like Oxfam. Corporate social responsibility is the flavour of the year.

Yet all over India the tea industry is keeling over because prices have crashed. Tea has not become a penny cheaper for the people who drink it by the gallon on British housing estates. There are suicides in Darjeeling, the centre of tea growing, and workers' children face starvation and malnutrition on tea estates everywhere.

What can be done? We had a meeting in London recently with Unilever, one of the world's largest food companies and tea buyers. We proposed that the company took the lead and ensured that auction prices in India were stabilised. This would happen if they just fixed a minimum floor price, and merely paid a decent rate that would cover the cost of production.

Indian tea workers don't need subsidies or handouts. They need fair prices, which they are clearly not getting. The present structure is simply unjust. Workers starve while profits are divided in the corridors of power. Is this the corporate social responsibility now espoused in all the world's largest corporations?

We recently learned that Lord (William) Leverhulme, the founder of Unilever, was a great philanthropist and social revolutionary for his time. So we ask why cannot Unilever now take the lead in the global food industry and change the rules of the game?

Shareholders don't want huge profits from companies where workers are starving. People all over Britain have clearly said that they want to make poverty history. It's time companies like Unilever and Nestlé really moved Fair trade forward.

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