

# A MORAL ECONOMY OF LABOUR? TEA COOPERATIVES IN EASTERN HIMALAYAN AND SUB-HIMALAYAN BENGAL TEA ZONE

BASEL, 5 SEPTEMBER 2017

Swatahsiddha Sarkar (North Bengal University)

Miriam Wenner (University of Göttingen/ University of Zurich)

# Contents

---

- Rationale and Research Questions
- Aims and Activities
- Findings
  - ▣ Ilam
  - ▣ Darjeeling
  - ▣ Dooars
- Summary and Outlook

# Rationale and Research Questions

- Transformations in tea economy
  - ▣ Rise of independent small-tea-growers
  - ▣ Decline of tea plantations (company-run)
  
- Crisis of tea labour in Northern Bengal tea zone
  
- Solutions? => Alternative modes of production?

# Aims

---

- Explore the problems and prospects of tea cooperatives and other collective enterprises as an alternative mode of production for the tea plantation zone of northern West Bengal (and Eastern Nepal)
- Networking and practical proposals for the establishment of workers' cooperatives

# Research questions

5

- In how far can cooperatives and collective enterprises respond to and accommodate the requirements of labour and small-tea growers on the one hand, and of the domestic and global tea markets on the other?
- What are the effects of tea cooperatives on broader social, economic, political and ecological structures?

# Cooperatives and collective action

6

- What is a cooperative?
  - “an autonomous association of persons unite voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise” (ICA 2016)

Here: Self-Help-Groups, Society; besides Operating Managing Committee; Small Producers Organizations

Terminology

- cooperative → legally recognized formal coop / Act
- ~~(ICA principles)~~
  - ↳ ~~only~~ (differ from housing) (consumer coops...)
- workers' coop
- producer coop
- SHGs (formal) (formal → DGo)
- Small Producers Organiz. (SPOs) (FT principle)
- Society (Welfare-) / Society's Act (formal)
- (Operating Managing) Committee OMC
  - ↳ CPI-M <sup>LF</sup> initiative / pd policy
  - ↳ CITU (earlier)
  - ↳ now: non-party-based; variety of commit. + actors
  - totally informal "movement" "structure"

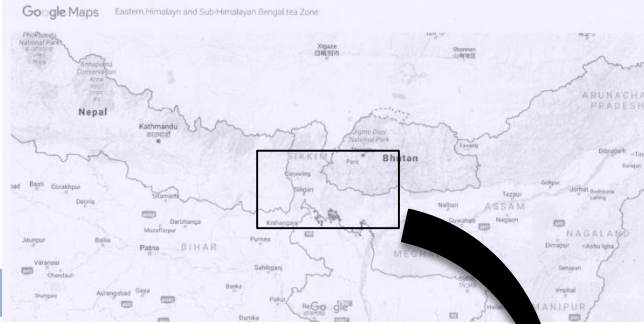
→ collective initiative / action

	formal	informal	
farmers			+ power / entitlements + ideology + associations (class power)
workers			

LAW scope for growth? (member/capital...)

# Three-fold focus

- the changing relations between LABOUR, TEA COMPANIES, and the MARKET as outcome of the abandonment and scaling down of tea plantations
- the shifting power relations at the lower level of global tea production networks
- the feasibility of collective production set-ups such as cooperatives as alternative modes of production.



# Eastern Himalayan & Sub-Himalayan Bengal Tea zone





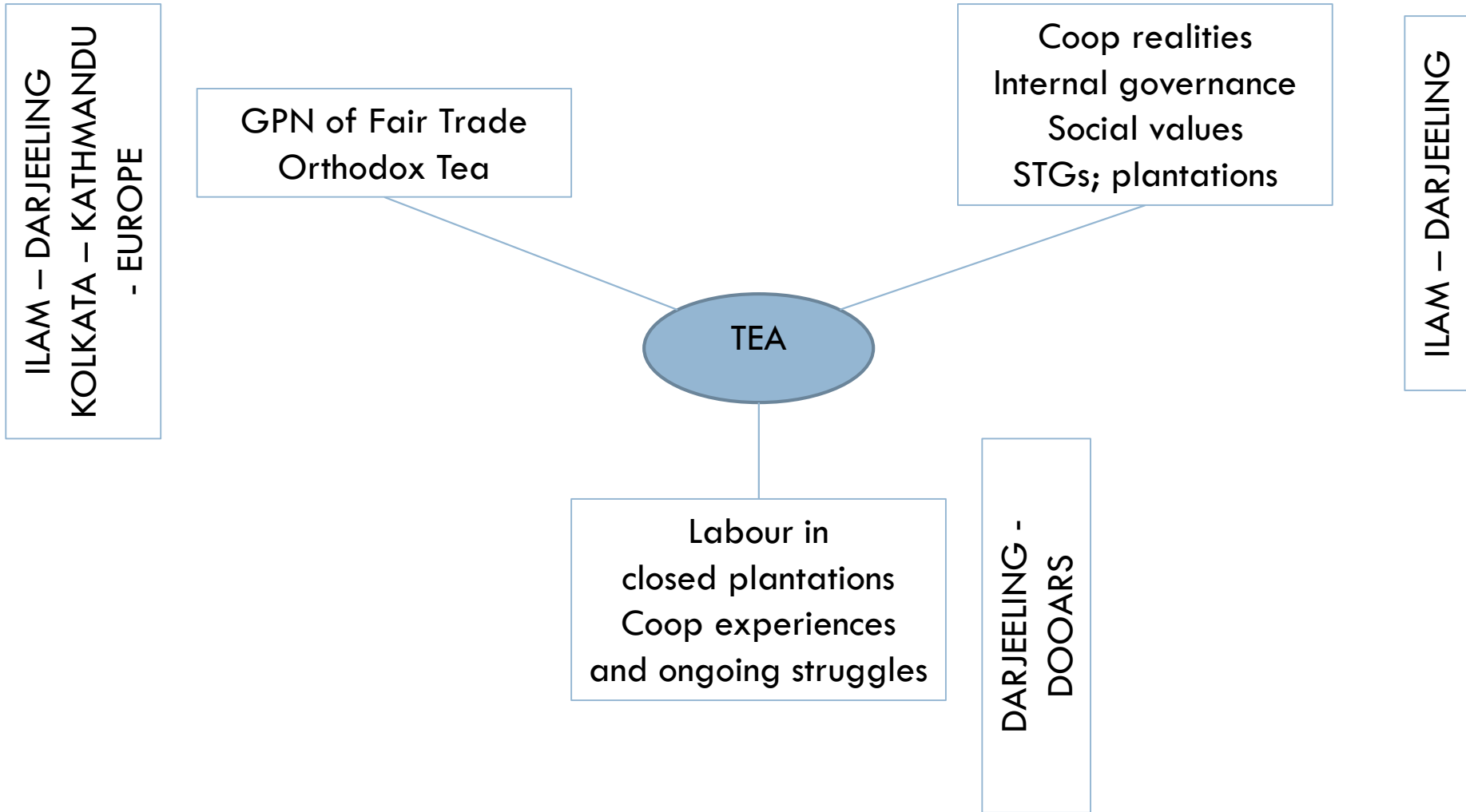
# Our Team



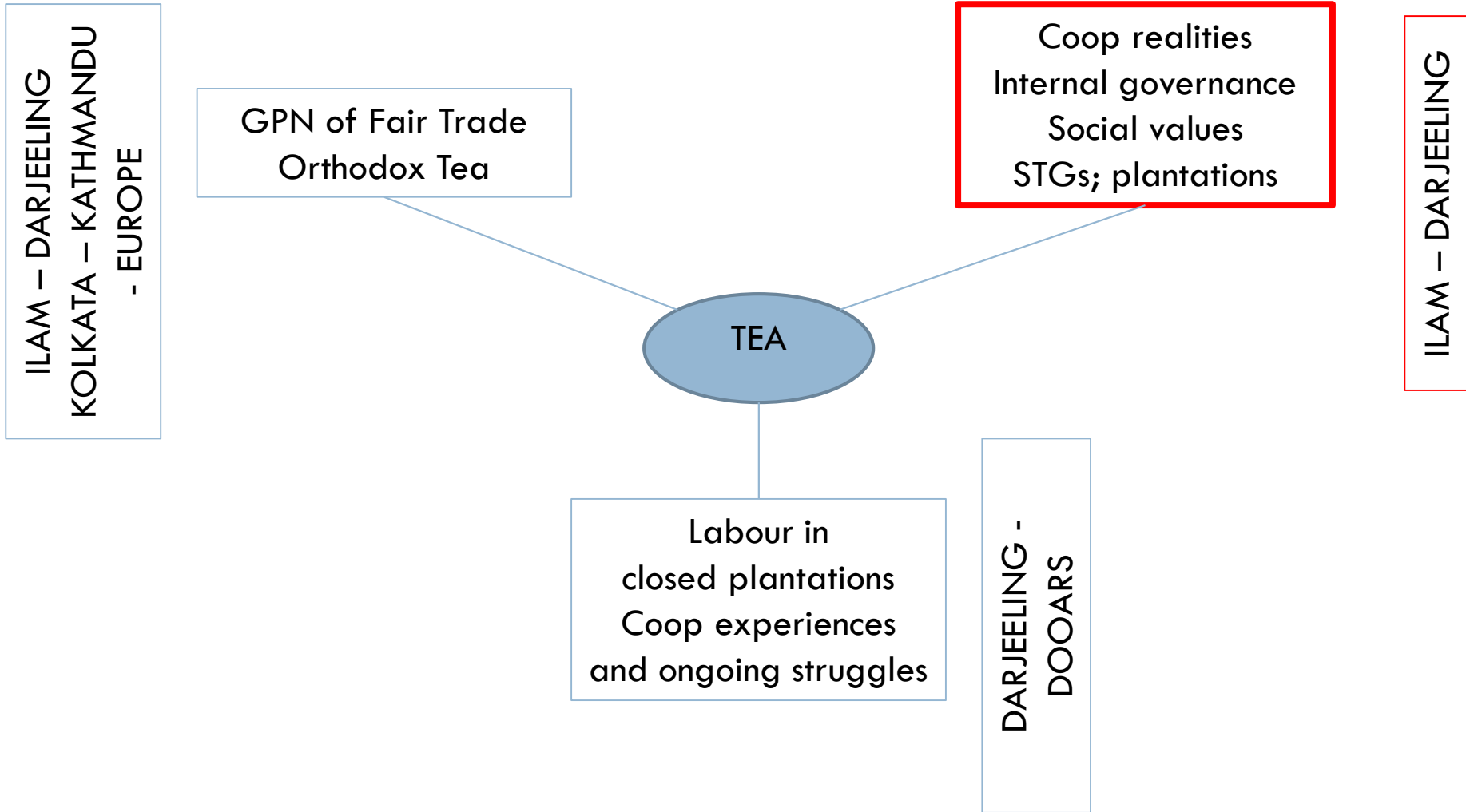
# Activities

- August – December 2016: Desk study; preparations
- Continuous: Indian team field visits Dooars
- December 2016 – February 2017: Swiss team visit to India. Field work in Darjeeling and Ilam
- February: Swiss team presentation at NBU
- June: Indian team visits Switzerland; internal workshop and discussion
- August: Swiss principal researcher visit to Darjeeling, and
- August 29 and 30: Seminar and Roundtable-workshop at NBU

# Activities and Topics



# Activities and Topics



# Cooperative realities - Ilam

13

## ILAM

- Ilam district
  - ▣ 64% of tea production by small-holders
  - ▣ ~7,000 farmers (NTCDB 2014/15))
  - ▣ 5,500 registered with CTCF
- 78 tea cooperatives (Nepal), 38 Ilam (CTCF 2016)
- Case studies
  - ▣ Tinjure
  - ▣ Sri Antu
  - ▣ Sunderpaani



# Lessons from Ilam

- Need for member awareness
- Put safeguards for transparency and accountability
  - Fear of monopolisation by a few
- Size of cooperative?
- Distribution of benefits?
- Existing support structure (CTCF, MAAS, donors) helps to marginalise some cooperative members while privileging a few
- Who is accountable and responsible for monitoring?

# Cooperative realities - Darjeeling

## Phulbaari\*

- From closed plantation to shared leasehold
- Now: Tea Workers Welfare Committee (TWWC)
  - ▣ 49% TWWC -51% Company (shared lease)

⇒ Total dependency of “farmers” on company comes in the disguise of “fair trade” and “workers’ empowerment”

⇒ Hope and fear

\*Name changed



# Activities and Topics

ILAM – DARJEELING  
KOLKATA – KATHMANDU  
- EUROPE

GPN of Fair Trade  
Orthodox Tea

TEA

Coop realities  
Internal governance  
Social values  
STGs; plantations

ILAM – DARJEELING

Labour in  
closed plantations  
Coop experiences  
and ongoing struggles

DARJEELING -  
DOOARS



# Power Relations in the Global Production Network for Fair Trade Darjeeling Tea (Andri Brugger)

- GPN => understand global trade as a series of networked interactions (non-linear); non-economic and non-state actors included; rules, institutions, norms enable/constrict economic activity
- How is the fair trade idea interacting with the power relations in the tea production sector of Darjeeling?
- How do different actors from the global production network (GPN) for orthodox Himalayan tea (OHT) translate the concept of Fairtrade in order to improve their position in the GPN for OHT.
- How do the interventions of Fairtrade create new space for decision making and how do they shift the power relations in the GPN for OHT?

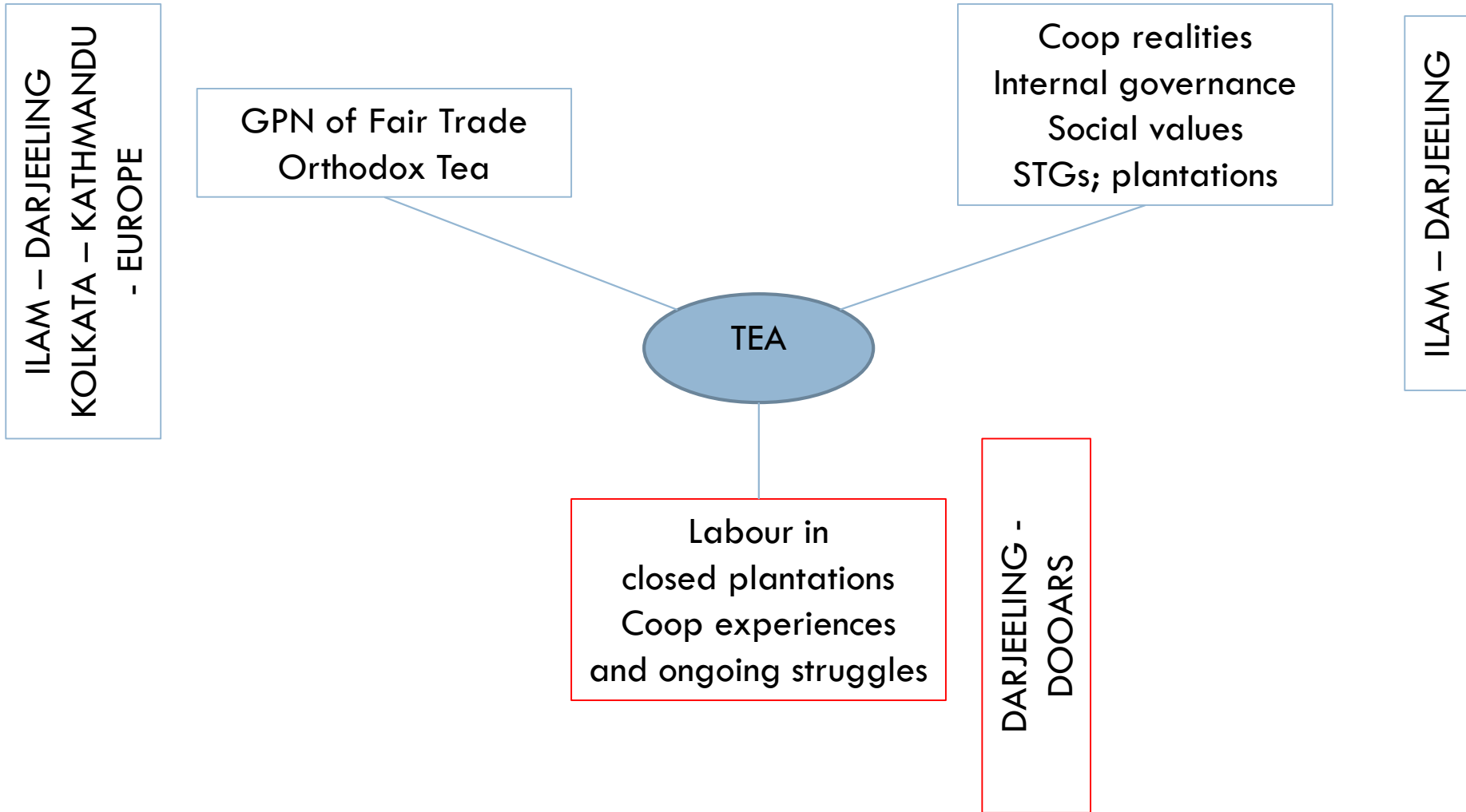
# Power Relations in the Global Production Network for Fair Trade Darjeeling Tea (Andri Brugger)

- Translating the idea of fair trade
- Identification of powerful actors and ideas in GPN



- RGS 2017 London
- Master thesis by end of September

# Activities and Topics



# Sub-Himalayan Bengal Tea Zone

- The crisis of plantation labour in the sub-Himalayan Bengal tea zone (comprising the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar) is on news, the condition of plantation labour has been grim since the beginning of the new millennium - plantations - vulnerable zones (casualisation, retrenchment, abandonment and closure)
- Jobless, human trafficking, unsafe migration, malnutrition, denial of social security, pecuniary benefits and legal entitlements

# Tea Estates (TE) Study Coverage

## TE in Sub-Himalayan Bengal

### Hill Area:-

Darjeeling Sub-Div	46 TE
Kurseong Sub-Div	29 TE
Kalimpong Sub-Div	06 TE
Total	81 TE

### Terai Region:

Siliguri Sub Div	45 TE
------------------	-------

### Dooars Area:-

Jalpaiguri Sub Div	33 TE
Malbazar Sub Div	56 TE
Alipurduar Sub Div	61 TE
Total	150 TE

**Hills+Terai+Dooars 276 TE**

## Closed TE 30 (during study period)

### Hills – 03 TE

Dhotre, Peshok, Kallej Valley

### Terai - 03 TE

Gungaram, Patharghata, Terai Land Project

### Dooars – 24 TE

Birpara, Demdima, Jay Birpara, Kalchini, Ngeswari, Dhumchi para, Lanka Para, Garganda, Hanta Para, Madarihat Land Project, Bundapani, Redbank, Kathalguri, Kilkaut, Bagrakote, Madhu, Dharanipur, Surendranagar, Ramjhora, Kumlai, Raipur, Dheklapara, Birpara, Kumlai

### Closed TE visited

Redbank, Demdima, Dhumchipara, Garganda, Jay Birpara, Nageswari, Kilkaut, Patharghatta, Bundapani, Redbank, Kumlai, Madhu

### Tea coops visited (08)

Phulbaari, Mineral Spring, Nepal three STGs, Jalpaiguri three STGs

## ▫ **COOPERTIVE EXPERIENCE IN DOOARS-DARJEELING**

- Sonali tea Cooperative (1978-83)
- Bundapani Tea Cooperative ( registered on April 26, 2017)
- SHG run tea factories Jalpaiguri STGs (3 such factories were inaugurated on 18 January, 2013)
- Phulbaari Tea Workers Welfare Committee (in operation since 2007)
- Mineral Spring SPO (in operation since 2001)
- Committee run production of tea leaves in all closed tea gardens

# EMPHASIS ON WORKERS' / PRODUCERS' INITIATIVE

- Fair Trade thrives on Small Producers' Organisation
- Tea Board of India encourages SHG model
- State Govt. facilitates STG initiative
- Corporate houses are interested in making workers stakeholders (viz. APPL)
- Rainforest, Solidariat, TrusTea thrive on workers' / producers' collective initiative in tea value chain
- Right based NGOs are supportive of cooperatives

# Cooperative as Alternative

Generation/ performance of Surplus Labour	Appropriation of Surplus Labour		
	Direct labour (A)	Non-Labour (B)	Collective Labour (C)
	AA	AB	AC
CA	CB	CC	

AA – Self Appropriative (Mineral Spring, Nepal cases)

AB – Exploitative (Jalpaiguri STGs vis-a-vis labour)

AC – Non Exploitative Communitic (Bundapani)

CB – Exploitative (Labour in Estates)

CC – Communitic (Sonali Workers cooperative)

CA – Exploitative Ccommunitic (Committes in closed gardens)



# Problems and Gaps

- Only partial comparability Nepal and India cases (farmers vs workers)
- Need further case studies of cooperative-like experiences in Darjeeling and Dooars
- Broaden focus to other cooperative experiences (e.g. consumer cooperatives) in Darjeeling/Dooars
- Issue of land-ownership and leasehold land
- Workers cooperative not in TU agenda
- Workers cooperative more a constructed reality than a spontaneous one

# Summary

- The possibilities of workers and farmers' collective action are determined by the nexus of the state apparatus, companies, local agents, national and international organisations (such as Fair Trade), and politics (both, in closed plantations and on small-scale-farms).
- This particular constellation results in a depoliticisation of labour, the creation of new dependencies, and the dilution of labour initiatives and labour concerns in broader policies and public perception.

# Summary

Prospects for the emergence of cooperatives are determined by:

- Workers' awareness
- Land-ownership
- Role of moral values and imagination of a “better life”
- Support by government and trade unions
- Facilitation by NGOs/ INGOs and global market chain based organisations

# Outcomes

- ◻ Worked out the plan for a joint paper paper (World Development and EPW)
- ◻ Presented the Mineral Spring experience in TISS, Gauwahati Conference
- ◻ Presented a paper in NBU Conference on Labour relations in post globalisation tea plantation industry
- ◻ Organised a Workshop on the problems and prospects of cooperatives in North Bengal
- ◻ Building up network with VV Giri National Labour Institute to organise a course on Plantation Labour Rights at NBU
- ◻ Building up network with Solidariad who showed interest to work conjointly
- ◻ Building up network with Action Aid and local NGOs to work in line with closed tea gardens and building up cooperatives
- ◻ Building up networks with major trade unions and workers of closed gardens to work out small workshop in each garden