

Call to involve tea workers in mainstream society

FE REPORT | Published: May 22, 2021 09:53:01



Speakers at a virtual discussion on Friday laid emphasis on involving the tea workers in the mainstream society, enhancing their access to education and healthcare services for improving their living standard.

They also suggested preparing a plan of actions for these workers and involving them with the process to review law related to labour rights.

The recommendations were made at a webinar titled 'Protection of Tea Workers: Challenges and Accountability of Actors' organised by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) in partnership with Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) and with support from Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) of the Canadian government marking International Tea Day.

Eminent economist Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud took part in the virtual event as the chief guest while Labour and Employment Secretary K M Abdus Salam as the special guest.

Chaired by noted economist and chairman of BRAC Bangladesh Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, the programme was attended by Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) Chairman M Shah Alam as a guest of honour.

Representatives from owners, trade unions, academics and government officials and rights activists also took part in the discussion.

Speaking on the occasion, Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud placed emphasis on including the tea workers in the mainstream society as they are secluded from other parts of the society and they remain unattended.

"Difficult it is, there should be effort to involve the tea workers in the mainstream society to improve their living standard gradually," said the economist.

He suggested conducting a dedicated survey to understand the level of poverty among the tea workers to provide them support under the government's social safety net programmes.

He also emphasised the importance of increasing productivity, education and healthcare services for the tea estate workers and their children.

"Increase in productivity of tea is desired but the calculation of profit and loss in the tea sector should be accurate for the workers to negotiate with the owners for their legitimate rights and benefits," Prof Mahmud added.

Mr Salam said a whole-of-government approach should be in place to solve issues related to workers' welfare.

He also stressed the need for preparing a sector-specific five-year plan in this regard.

Mr Hossain Zillur Rahman suggested that the economists get involved in the calculation of what the tea workers actually get.

"The culture and languages of different ethnic communities in the tea gardens should also be protected," said Dr Rahman.

Philip Gain, director at SEHD, presented a keynote paper.

According to it, some 138,367 workers are employed at 158 tea estates excluding eight gardens in Panchagarh and Thakurgaon. Tea workers get only Tk 120 per day as per owner and worker's latest agreement.

"The extent of discrimination and deprivation is reflected in the wages earned by the tea workers," the paper reads.

Representatives of estate owners said the workers get a good amount of different in-kind benefits besides cash benefit as per the agreement.

Mr Shah Alam said unlike other businesses, tea estate owners have to consider versatile issues including workers' welfare, crop production and profitability.

"We look at them (workers) as our asset, as we cannot operate without their support," he said.

The tea workers receive a good amount of in-kind benefit from the owners in addition to in-cash benefit, he added.

Rambhajan Kairi, General Secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), said tea workers are no way involved with the process of law amendment.

"I would request the authorities concerned to involve the tea workers while any changes are brought to related labour laws to make them really meaningful for us," said Mr Kairi.

saif.febd@gmail.com

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