

## **An assessment of improved plucking baskets introduced to the tea industry of Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka is the world's largest supplier of black tea. As a beverage to compete with other multinationals, the quality of our tea has to be improved. The present trend of moving towards the poly sacks from the conventional cane baskets has contributed largely to the deterioration of the quality of made tea. Excessive heat generation, leaf damage caused by crushing in the hands and pressing hard in to the sacks seem to be the main causes of quality deterioration. Furthermore, carrying weight on head affects health. Therefore as a solution, innovators of the tea industry are trying to introduce new plucking baskets. This study was carried out to compare two of the promising new baskets (A and B), which have shoulder straps and wide open mouths, with the existing methods (cane basket and poly sack), to test whether there could be an improvement in the plucker productivity, the quality of the tea leaves and the working conditions of the pluckers.

A suitable methodology was developed with the assistance of the Tea Research Institute. It consisted of a field experiment, a social survey and non-participant observation. A representative sample of six pluckers were selected and allowed to pluck three selected fields. Their behavior and attitudes in relation to the different baskets were tested. Pluckers responses were cross-checked and more details were obtained from the non-participant observation. Plucker productivity and leaf damage were tested by the measurements obtained from the field experiment. The two new types have shown a significant improvement in the working conditions of the pluckers when compared to the cane basket. The two new types when compared to the poly sack have significantly reduced the leaf damage. The plucker productivity too has increased significantly with the two new types of baskets over the poly sack. Based on the results, it is proved that the basket A and B can be introduced to the tea industry, with further improvements.

Recommendations have been given for the A and B separately. Furthermore, to serve the expected purpose of introducing them, they should come with a different management package. The weighing system and the mode of transportation of leaves to the weighing shed need to be changed. It is strongly recommended to make the pluckers aware of the damage done in the hand and by pressing the leaves in to the baskets. By educating them on the adverse effects of carrying weight on heads, the shoulder strapping system could be encouraged.