

POPPY APPROACH IN ACTION: HOW THE DIRIYA ARUNA PROJECT ELEVATES SRI LANKA’S TEA SECTOR



In this good practice note, Tharaka Jayasinghe explains how the POPPY extension approach was implemented in the Diriya Aruna Extension Project to overcome some of the major challenges in the Sri Lankan tea sector.

CONTEXT

Ceylon tea, globally renowned for its quality, is facing a decline in both production and quality. Despite the efforts of traditional training and extension programs led by key stakeholders—such as the Tea Smallholding Development Authority (TSHDA), the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka (TRISL), and private sector entities (like fertilizer companies)—the industry continues to struggle. This has resulted in reduced profit margins for both tea factories and small farmers. In response, tea factories have started to directly engage with smallholders to improve green leaf quality, supplementing traditional extension services. However, a key gap persists: measuring the impact of qualitative advice on farmer practices and outcomes.



Extension officers of TSHDA visiting a tea garden

The “Diriya Aruna” Extension Project seeks to address these challenges by adopting the POPPY Extension Approach. This approach integrates **Public-Private Partnerships**, **Outcome Orientation**,

Participation, Personalization, and Youth Engagement to empower tea farmers. By fostering collaboration between public and private sectors, focusing on measurable results, valuing farmer knowledge, tailoring support to individual needs, and engaging youth, the approach enables farmers to set goals, receive targeted support, and track their progress. This leads to improved practices such as reducing plucking rounds and managing unplanned intercrops.

THE DIRIYA ARUNA EXTENSION PROJECT

The "Diriya Aruna" initiative is a collective extension approach that brings together all stakeholders in the tea value chain. Its primary goal is to tackle the critical issue of declining tea quality and production. By uniting efforts across the sector, this initiative aims to address key challenges (see Box 1).

Box 1: Main Extension Challenges in the Sri Lankan Tea Sector

- Limited human and financial resources in public and private sectors (TSHDA, TRI, Tea Board)
- Weak research-extension-farmer-input linkage systems
- Lack of a legislated Tea Extension Policy
- Poor working conditions and infrastructure (transportation and roads)
- Top-down, supply-driven extension systems

Team Approach with Clear Roles

The project began on March 1, 2023, and is set to run for one year. Thirty-six smallholder tea producers supplying green leaf to the "Aruna Tea Factory" were selected for the project. The project team was divided into three groups, each with members from fertilizer companies, TSHDA, TRISL, and the tea factory's extension team. Each member had a specific role (see Table 1). Teams visited their assigned farmers twice a month, delivering standardized messages and monitoring progress. Every three months, motivational gift packs were distributed by fertilizer companies. Field data was collected monthly, and tailored advice was provided based on individual field conditions.

Table 1: Project Members and Their Roles

No	Actor	Role in the Project
1.	Aruna Tea Factory	Coordinate green leaf suppliers, organize training, collect data, and share funding
2.	Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka (TRISL)	Provide expert knowledge to the team and farmers
3.	Tea Smallholdings Development Authority (TSHDA)	Share extension expertise with the team and farmers
4.	Sri Lanka Tea Board	Provide market information to the team and farmers
5.	A. Baur & Co. (Pvt) Ltd	Supply funding, allocate inputs, and offer extension expertise

Stakeholder Consultations

In January 2023, the project team, comprising public and private institutions, convened to discuss budget allocation, data collection methods, and monitoring and evaluation procedures. A pre-survey was conducted in February 2023 to assess the current production and quality levels of tea farmers. This information was used to set three-month milestones for tracking progress. Regular progress meetings were held every three months to assess achievements, make adjustments, and ensure goals were being met.

Inclusivity was a priority during stakeholder consultations. Efforts were made to involve all stakeholders, including tea smallholders, government officials, private sector representatives, and tea factory personnel, regardless of age, gender, education, or physical abilities. Multiple communication channels—such as face-to-face meetings, phone calls, online surveys, and social media—were used to ensure everyone felt comfortable contributing. Updates on project progress, challenges, and successes were regularly shared with stakeholders through feedback mechanisms.

Project Implementation and Learning Process

The project followed a systematic approach:

1. **Stakeholder engagement:** All stakeholders convened to discuss the project scope, budget, customer selection, and implementation timeline.
2. **Initial survey:** The project team visited tea suppliers to collect data on farming practices (fertilizer application, shade management, pruning, water management, etc.).
3. **Data analysis:** The data was analyzed to assess the current level of farming and income.
4. **Setting targets:** The project set a goal of achieving a 20% increase in tea land yield.
5. **Team formation:** Three teams were formed, each representing all stakeholders.
6. **Monthly visits:** The teams visited farmers monthly, providing technical and business advice based on collected data.
7. **Quarterly reviews:** Every three months, the team met to review farmer performance, making adjustments to implementation and technical advice as necessary.

Measuring Qualitative Advice: The T-Frame Innovation

A major challenge was quantifying the effectiveness of qualitative advice given to farmers. To address this, the project introduced the **T-Frame** (see Box 2).

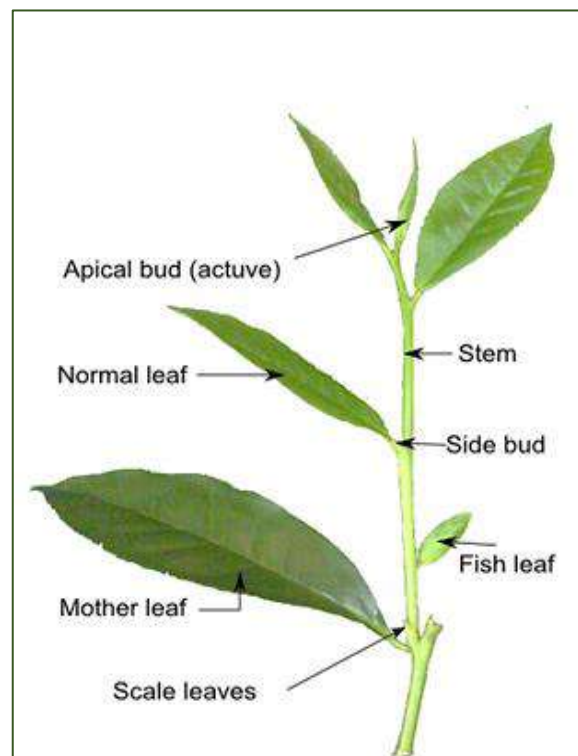
Box 2: Why T-Frame? The T-Frame is a one-square-foot frame used by extension officers to measure:

- Number of good leaves per square foot on the plucking table
- Number of dormant leaves
- Number of immature leaves
- Number of leaf stakes
- Number of mother leaves

The T-Frame allowed extension officers to convert verbal advice into measurable data, ensuring that the advice given to farmers was trackable and could be tailored to individual needs.

POPPY Approach in Action

In the Diriya Aruna project, we adopted the Public-Private Partnership, Outcome-Oriented, Participatory, Personalized, and Youth Engagement (POPPY) Extension Approach, which we believe could be a game-changing alternative with further collaborations and innovations. We hope it will revolutionize the Sri Lankan tea sector in the future.





Extension Officer collecting field data using T-Frame

- **P - Public-Private Partnerships:** POPPY brought together effective groups from both the private and public sectors, such as the Aruna Tea Factory, A. Baur & Co. (Pvt.) Ltd., and two other private fertilizer companies, alongside public extension agencies like TRISL, TSHDA, and the Tea Board. By combining expertise and resources, it fosters joint problem-solving and tailored solutions for farmers.
- **O - Outcome-Oriented:** POPPY shifts the focus from mere training to achieving measurable results. Farmers are empowered to set specific goals, receive targeted support, and track their progress, ensuring that every action serves a clear purpose. For example, some tea smallholders were practicing a 10-14 day plucking round. We advised them to reduce it to the standard 7 days, and the project team continuously monitored their progress.
- **P - Participatory:** POPPY views farmers as active partners, not passive recipients. Their knowledge, challenges, and aspirations are incorporated into decision-making, leading to solutions that resonate and drive ownership. For instance, there were unplanned intercrops causing damage to tea plantations. The project team advised farmers to reduce these unplanned intercrops, as well as some timber.
- **P - Personalized:** We understand that each farmer's situation is unique. Individual needs and circumstances are assessed, and support is customized accordingly. This ensures that interventions have a greater impact and avoids a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, some farmers had issues with nutrient management, while others struggled with labor management. The project team individually identified and addressed these priority issues.
- **Y - Youth Engagement:** POPPY recognizes the crucial role youth play in securing the future of the tea industry. It creates opportunities for young farmers to learn, collaborate, and inject fresh perspectives into traditional practices. We purposively selected 25% young tea farmers and created small video clips showcasing their progress and success. These were shared across various WhatsApp groups of the Aruna Tea Factory to motivate other young tea growers.



A demonstration Site of Diriya Aruna Extension Project

PROJECT IMPACT

The continuous feedback, advice, and regular assessments led to significant improvements. By the eighth month, the project had achieved a 17-30% yield improvement—exceeding the initial target of 20%. The percentage of best-quality leaves increased from 30% to 48%, while nitrogen replacement rose from 7% to 10%. Furthermore, all participating farmers now maintain records of their inputs and outputs, enabling better cost management and profit tracking.

The project created 36 model tea lands, and 10 additional smallholders will be attached to each model farm to encourage peer learning. The T-Frame tool is now widely used by both public and private tea extension officers in Sri Lanka, ensuring long-term impact.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALING

The **POPPY Extension Approach** has revolutionized the tea industry by fostering collaboration between public and private sectors and introducing innovative tools like the T-Frame. This tool is now extensively used by both private input companies and public sector extension officers, significantly enhancing community engagement efforts.

The approach’s success in increasing yield and improving farming practices demonstrates its scalability. The integration of new tools and strategies into institutional practices ensures that the impact will continue to grow. Public sector officers have embraced the T-Frame, using it across the country to engage with tea smallholders effectively.

CONCLUSION



Project team visiting a tea garden

The POPPY Extension Approach has proven to be a transformative force in the Sri Lankan tea industry. By combining innovative tools with a collaborative and tailored approach, the project has improved both the efficiency and effectiveness of extension services. The approach has empowered farmers, private input companies, and public sector officers to adopt a culture of continuous improvement. As the tea industry evolves, the POPPY Extension Approach will continue to be a vital resource in ensuring the long-term success of Sri Lanka's tea production.

Tharaka Jayasinghe, Manager, Advisory and Extension, A Baur and Co. (Pvt.) Ltd, Sri Lanka. He can be reached at (Email: Jayasingheatm@gmail.com).

**AESA Secretariat: Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP)
Road No 10, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India**

www.aesnetwork.org

Email: aesnetwork@gmail.com