



rubbernews

on tap – angezapft

Rubber - At the Heart of the Beautiful Game

Unlike in previous World Cups, there was no public debate about the conditions under which footballs (or 'soccerballs' for US readers) are produced, when the best teams had a go at each other in Brazil this summer.

Which is somewhat sad, because the sap from *hevea brasiliensis*, the rubber tree, is at the heart of each football: Bladder and lamination, a total of more than 60% of the weight of a match standard ball are rubber.

And the Brazilian Amazon rainforest is where the story of the globalization of true rubber started, with the theft of 70,000 rubber seeds by what would nowadays be called a bio-pirate (from Britain). Without these seeds there would be no rubber industry in Southeast and South Asia.

Equally uncommented was the good news that in April footballs with the Fair Rubber Logo became available in Germany again (they are also labelled with the Fairtrade logo for the conditions under which the balls are stitched in Pakistan; and the Forest Stewardship Council logo for the rubber).

The last 'just in time' order went to Greenpeace - and on this ball even the material of the outer skin consists of fairly traded FSC-certified rubber.



Natural Rubber 4 - Synthetic Rubber 0

In a world that is increasingly being shaped by 'Global Weirding' (i.e. not just an overall increase in global temperatures, but additional disruptions of weather patterns like the monsoon, which is late or early, brings a trickle or comes with cloudbursts causing landslides, ...), using sustainable raw materials becomes even more important: Synthetic rubber is petroleum based, i.e. uses up fossil fuel, thus increasing CO2. At the end of their life products made from petroleum (i.e. 'plastic') have to be burnt (even more CO2) or go to land fill.

Rubber trees, on the other hand, sequester even more CO2 than the Amazon Rainforest, natural rubber provides far more work opportunities than any refinery - and at the end of the cycle natural rubber is biodegrade. Add Fair Trade - and you have a 'perfect product' instead of a perfect environmental mess.

Drought in Sri Lanka - And It's Getting Worse

The rubber trees may still form a lush, green canopy, but everywhere in Sri Lanka the lack of water is a big issue.

Like in neighbouring India the monsoon has been poor this year. According to the Sri Lankan government the country in August was in its 10th month of a dry spell and the harvest (in particular the rice harvest) has been badly affected. An official told the IRIN news agency at the end of August: "In some areas in the North, North Central and Eastern Provinces, the water levels in the irrigation reservoirs will be sufficient only for drinking purposes and that, too, will be barely enough."

The El Nino weather system is blamed for this years lack of rain, but the monsoons have been

unreliable for a number of years now, it comes late or early, either bringing such intense rain that everything gets washed away, or hardly any.

Access to drinking water is the most pressing issue.

Fair Trade is not charity, the producers (or to be precise: the Fair Trade committees the workers elected) decide on what the Fair Trade money will be spent. And in view of the drought

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conditions the lion's share of the Fair Trade money is being allocated to water projects.

If the water source in or near the village dries up it means fetching it from up to a mile away,

every litre needed for drinking, cooking, washing, bathing ... It means getting up at four in the morning in order to make it to work on time. It means using water from small streams from which cattle and wild animals drink too. The water is likely to be contaminated and has to be boiled – which means more work if someone has to gather firewood, or more costs if the family uses a gas cooker.

The Fair Trade money has gone towards building tanks with a filtration system, laying pipes, installing taps, showers - and in one pioneer village water meters. Together with

the plantation management the Fair Trade committee suggested a small water charge. In exchange a water committee would regularly check pipes and taps, exchange the filters in the tank and be on call in case of an emergency. The water fee would provide a small income for the members of the water committee and pay for the maintenance.

As it turns out the villagers are happy to pay – to them a clean, well-maintained continuous source of water in their village is well worth the money. And to the Fair Rubber Association the water meter project is of special importance, too: The Fair Trade premium was the seed money for a project that will from now on be self financing.

Fair Trade in Action

'We had a long lists of things we wanted to do, a creche for the little ones, transport projects, a community centre, but we all felt that the water issue needs to be sorted first', recalls a member of the Fair Trade committee in Pitiyakanda, a rubber plantation (and supplier to member of the Fair Rubber Association) in one of the drier parts of the country, north east of Colombo. Last year even the remoter water sources dried up for six months and one of the villages had to rely on a water delivery truck which came every second day.

Now there are eight taps and although the drinking water still has to be boiled as a precautionary measure, everyone is happy. The whole village has contributed to a puja in the nearby temple, a religious ceremony with lots of music, dancing and the blessing of the taps by the gods whose colourful representations are normally hidden behind curtains. But on the day the water started flowing they were on display and got their share of the fruit and

sweets that were being passed around. In the next phase of the water project filters will be installed so that the water is safe for drinking right out of the tap and in a final stage each house will have its own indoor water source and a water meter.

Nadika Dabawardina is the clerk of the plantation housing society. She lives together with her husband, her recently retired parents and her two children, one of her boys is eight, the little one is nine months old. While she was pregnant Nadika spent several days in hospital with a water related infection. And giving birth at home with no access to water was just horrible, she recalls.

A few years ago Nadika and several other villagers took out a loan to get their homes connected to the nearest well. But on most days only a small amount of dirty water spluttered out of the tap, the pressure was too low and the families gave up, despite of the money they had invested. Now one of the new taps is right next to Nadika's house.



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