

# The human cost of your wellies

*Only a very few consumer companies address working conditions among rubber suppliers. In the rubber plantations of Indonesia, **Peter Bengtsen** discovers violations of international labour conventions, payment below the minimum wage and child labour.*

## International rubber brands

**Tyres:** Bridgestone, Firestone, Michelin, Continental and Goodyear

**Wellies:** Hunter, Vagabond and Viking

**Baby bottle teats:** Babynova, Chicco and Mam

**Other:** Dunlopillo mattresses, Durex condoms

The rubber trees stand in endless rows as far as the eye can see. Before dawn and into the afternoon rubber tappers work among the trees by cutting with extreme accuracy into the bark, making the milky white fluid trickle smoothly down into small coconut shells or plastic bowls at the foot of the tree.

“You need expertise to make the correct incisions in the bark for the right amount of rubber to come out in the right speed”, says Cecilia Nancy, a senior researcher at the Indonesian Rubber Research Institute.

The rubber trees bleed for hours while tappers move on to the next tree. And the next and the next. Later the tappers start all over, this time carrying a large bucket in which the rubber is collected before it is processed into your rubber bands, boots, gloves, mattresses, condoms, balloons, baby-bottle teats, bike tyres and, most of all, car tyres.

Rubber is all around you. And rubber is big business on a global scale, with most of the rubber in everyday products originating from big plantations and small farms in South-East Asia.

## Violations of labour conventions

In the vast archipelago of Indonesia's thousands of islands, rubber plantations and small-scale farms are easily found in the lush and green countryside, especially on the island of Sumatra. Easily found, but not easily entered. To all but one of the plantations I go to, I am refused leave to visit workers in their barracks and among the rubber trees. So I meet them in other ways.

In the canteen of rubber plantation PT Silva Inhutani in southern Sumatra I rest for a meal after having been refused entrance. ‘Canteen’ means a rather basic 4x4 metre wooden construction with bamboo providing shade from the scorching sun. The menu offers only one meal: rice and chicken.

Here I meet Pundo, a 31 year old rubber tapper, and some of his colleagues. They tell me about their lives. Several hundred on this estate are employed on a day labour basis. None are hired permanently, even though some of the tappers have worked here more than 10 years. As day labourers, the workers have no job security and are not entitled to form or become members of a union, even though in all other aspects they are treated as permanent workers.

“I have lived and worked here for more than 10 years, but as a day labourer with no permanent contract. Rubber tappers are not given permanent employment. Also, we are not allowed to establish a union”, Pundo says.

This directly violates labour conventions from the International Labour Organization (ILO), a UN body. Despite several emails to the plantation company I never receive any response.

Furthermore, most rubber tappers I meet work seven days a week with a maximum of one or two Sundays off per month. “Tappers are pushed to work on Sundays. Many also need to because salaries are low here”, says Tumino, a union board member in PT Gotong Royong.

## Salaries not enough to make a living

Day labourers are common in Indonesian rubber plantations. Not all receive wages meeting the country's minimum wage, despite working for years for the same company.

In the small village of Penggalangan in northern Sumatra, I talk to rubber tappers working in a nearby plantation. Here, day labourers receive a payment 25% below the provincial minimum wage.

“I earn 25,000 IDR (£1.25) daily. It is not enough to make a living, so I try to find other side jobs, but it is not easy”, 35 year old Simijir says. He has been a day



**14 year old Yoga from Indonesia has been working as a rubber tapper for the last two years to support his family. He does not go to school and dreams of owning his own rubber farm when he grows up.**

labourer at the same plantation for three years now and lives in a small hut with his wife and two children.

Simijir earns less than the equivalent of £45 per month, including income from a small rubber nursery. The minimum wage is £60 per month. Other day labourers tell the same story, but not all. Some receive higher salaries of up to £2.50 per day.

“If you have family and children the minimum wage is not adequate. Then you need to find extra work to make it go around”, Warita, a 56 year old rubber tapper, tells me.

This is supported by an ILO labour force survey in Indonesia from 2010 which shows 82% of plantation workers (in general, not only rubber) earn less than the poverty rate of US\$2 per day, with rubber tappers receiving the lowest wage levels compared to other workers.

Of the permanently employed rubber tappers I interview in Indonesia, no-one earns less than the minimum wage.

## 14 year old Yoga feeds his family

Indonesia has around 1.8 million child labourers of which around 60% work in agriculture including rubber, according to the ILO.

An ILO survey from 2008 of 755 children working for rubber plantations and farmers documented that 59% were below 15 years of age, and that 65% had dropped out of school. Half of the children worked for private companies.

After several years of efforts in Indonesia by the ILO and the Indonesian government, rubber plantation owners are now more aware of the consequences of employing children. I meet no children working in the plantations I try to visit, but among small-scale rubber farmers in some countryside areas children are still hired as cheap labour. Their tasks are the same as adults: cutting trees, collecting rubber and spraying weeds.

In the Sumatran village of Penumangan Baru I follow 14 year old Yoga at work and visit his home. He has been tapping rubber for two years, employed by different farmers.

“I dropped out of school because my parents couldn’t afford to pay”, he says.

Yoga now supplements the uncertain income from his father’s day labouring, which is mainly in construction jobs. This makes two daily meals possible for the family. Mostly the family eats rice and cassava leaves, common food in poor countryside households. Yoga works 6-7 days per week and earns around £1.50 per day.

“The Indonesian government has ratified ILO conventions 138 and 182 about the worst forms of child labour and has made a 2020 plan for eradicating these types of child labour. ILO supports the plan,” I am told by Dede Sudono, Child Labour Officer in ILO Jakarta.

## Visit to Bridgestone plantation

As in all industries, some workplaces seem better than others. The Sumatra plantation of the world’s biggest tyre maker Bridgestone differs in several ways from the other plantations I tried to visit: It is the biggest in Indonesia, covering the equivalent of 36,000 football fields; it did not refuse me entrance; and it showed the highest average wages of all the plantations I investigated.

### Top 5 rubber producers







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**The Bridgestone plantation on Sumatra in Indonesia covers the size of 36,000 football fields (18,000 ha) and is the biggest in Indonesia.**

The plantation employs around 6,000 workers, of which 3,800 are tappers. It is common to work seven days per week, making a monthly wage of between £100 and £125 possible – double the minimum wage. Most of the tappers are permanent workers and are provided with free housing as in other plantations. Tappers are organised into a union, and the plantation has a small hospital which is free for workers.

## Weak social responsibility

Industry-wide investigations of corporate social responsibility (CSR) by rubber brands have been almost non-existent, despite rubber being a big global business. Problematic working conditions are not difficult to document among rubber tappers in South-East Asia. The few existing surveys document very weak social responsibility when it comes to rubber production.

A recent survey by Danish research centre DanWatch found that in 2013, in practice, only one of the 32 investigated rubber brands (Durex condoms by Reckitt Benckiser) monitor working conditions among rubber suppliers.

On paper, in their policies, only five more brands address these issues.

Consumers therefore have no assurance that their rubber products are produced in a responsible way. The survey covered a range of products including mattresses, boots, gloves, condoms, balloons and rubber bands.

Also in 2013, International Consumer Research and Testing (ICRT) published a survey of the world's biggest car tyre brands – Bridgestone, Continental, Michelin, Pirelli and more.

It found high levels of overall environmental and social policies by the brands, but the responsibility seems not to reach as far as the rubber production level. Here, all surveyed tyre brands fail.

“The survey illustrates how hollow policies on social responsibility can seem when they are not supported by a certain amount of transparency – and thereby a will to document how you in practice focus on relevant challenges. Not the least regarding the rubber production,” Associate Professor Steen Vallentin from Copenhagen Business School comments.

## Fairtrade rubber as a way forward?

Even though rubber industries are well-established it is not possible to buy tyres, boots or other rubber products with the Fairtrade label.

But good news may be on the horizon. In 2012 the Fair Rubber Association was established as a forum for both rubber-using companies and civil society organisations. Its objective is to improve the living conditions among rubber tappers and farmers.

“I would recommend rubber-using companies to join the Fair Rubber Association and pay a Fair Trade premium: The extra cost will not make much of a difference in the final price for consumers,” says Fair Rubber Association co-founder Martin Kunz, who was also the first general secretary of the FairTrade Labelling Organization (FLO) International.

But the road is long. So far only four plantations and networks of small-scale farmers are members.

*Some names have been changed.*

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