

Power and Agency in Kenya: Political Duels and Cooperation's Between Smallholder Tea Farmers and Private Factories in Nandi County

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2025.100600138>

Received: 11 June 2025; Accepted: 16 June 2025; Published: 23 July 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the political duel between smallholder tea farmers (SHTFs) and private tea factories in Nandi County, Kenya, a critical tea-producing region. Anchored in Political Economy Theory and Negotiation Agency Theory, it examines how government policies, market competition, training programs, and technological advancements shape SHTF-private factory political interactions. Employing a qualitative explanatory design with a historical approach, the study collected data through semi-structured interviews with 45 participants (SHTFs, KTDA executives, and private factory managers) from April 1 to April 24, 2023, complemented by document analysis. Findings indicate that the Tea Act (2021) enhances SHTF bargaining power, but private factories' policy influence and mechanization still exacerbate inequalities, marginalizing SHTFs. SHTFs counter this adverse reality through cooperatives, advocacy, and training adoption, though structural constraints limit their agency. Recommendations include strengthening SHTF representation, ensuring policy transparency, and promoting sustainable practices to foster equitable partnerships. This study contributes to understanding power dynamics and agency in agricultural value chains.

Keywords: Smallholder Tea Farmers (SHTFs), Private Tea Factories, Political Economy Theory, and Negotiation Agency Theory, and Nandi County.

BACKGROUND

The Kenyan tea industry is a cornerstone of the national economy, contributing significantly to foreign exchange earnings and supporting millions of rural livelihoods. Nandi County, located in Kenya's North Rift, is a prime tea-producing region due to the favorable conditions of Nandi Hills. Smallholder tea farmers (SHTFs) are central to this sector, supplying tealeaves to both the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) and private factories. However, their interactions with private factories are shaped by complex political, economic, and social dynamics, marked by power imbalances, policy influences, and varying degrees of agency. This study examines these dynamics through the lenses of Political Economy Theory and Negotiation Agency Theory, analyzing how SHTFs navigate relationships with private factories amidst government policies, market competition, training initiatives, and technological advancements to secure equitable outcomes.

Despite the critical role of SHTFs in Kenya's tea industry, their ability to negotiate fair terms with private factories remains constrained by structural inequalities and power asymmetries. Private factories, leveraging financial resources and policy influence, often prioritize profit-driven interests, marginalizing SHTFs who lack comparable resources or direct representation. While SHTFs employ strategies like forming cooperatives and participating in training programs to enhance their bargaining power, the persistence of biased policies, limited

access to technology and intermediary dependence undermines their efforts. The problem this study addresses is: How do SHTFs in Nandi County exercise agency to negotiate equitable outcomes with private tea factories within a political and economic framework that perpetuates power imbalances, and what are the implications for sustainable tea sector development? This question is critical as it highlights the tension between SHTFs' agency and structural constraints, offering insights into fostering inclusive and sustainable agricultural value chains.

The Tea Act of 1959, revised in 2013 and 2021, governs interactions between SHTFs and private factories, establishing KTDA to provide infrastructure, extension services, and market access while promoting competition through private factories. However, private factories' proximity to policymakers allows them to influence policy formulation, often prioritizing profit over SHTF welfare (Laven & Berry, 2018; Vorley et al., 2012). At the Mombasa Tea Auction, private factories' mechanization and diverse tea varieties (e.g., green, blue, purple tea) secure higher prices than SHTFs' black CTC tea, reflecting capital accumulation strategies that marginalize resource-constrained farmers (Ndegwa et al., 2024; Burgess et al., 2006). Biased policies, sometimes shaped by policymakers with corporate ties, undermine state legitimacy, necessitating transparent and inclusive policymaking (Oduor, 2022; Robinson, 2020).

SHTFs, as subordinate actors, exercise agency to navigate these power structures. Through cooperatives, they pool resources, negotiate better prices, and access premium markets, reducing reliance on KTDA intermediaries (Chebet et al., 2019; Oxfam, 2018). Advocacy via farmer organizations has driven reforms, such as the 2013 Tea Act amendments, enhancing transparency and accountability (Wanyonyi & Njeru, 2014). Training programs, often provided by private factories or partners like the Rainforest Alliance, improve tea quality and competitiveness (Smith & Johnson, 2022). Yet, structural disadvantages—limited resources, labor-intensive methods, and intermediary dependence—constrain their negotiating power, underscoring the need for direct representation and robust cooperative leadership (Liu & Zhang, 2020; Wiggins, 2011).

SHTFs are vital to the tea industry, cultivating tea on small plots and supplying it to MNCs or private factories for processing and export. In Nandi County, this relationship is shaped by economic, social, and political factors, often marked by power imbalances. Political Economy Theory highlights how structural inequalities enable private factories to dominate pricing and contract negotiations, marginalizing SHTFs (Poulantzas, 1978). Negotiation Agency Theory illuminates how SHTFs exercise agency to address these challenges, using strategies like collective bargaining and advocacy to secure fairer outcomes (Fischer & Ury, 1981).

Conflicts over pricing are common. In Kenya, SHTFs have protested against MNCs like Unilever, accusing them of paying below production costs, as seen in 2020 demonstrations against Lipton's pricing practices (Chitayi, 2020). Such disputes reflect the power asymmetry between resource-constrained SHTFs and financially robust MNCs, underscoring the need for equitable pricing mechanisms. Similar issues arise with private factories, which may underreport tea weights to reduce payments, as reported in other tea-producing regions (Das, 2020). These practices exacerbate SHTFs' economic vulnerabilities, aligning with Political Economy Theory's focus on exploitative resource allocation.

However, SHTFs demonstrate agency through collective action. Cooperatives enable SHTFs to pool resources and negotiate better prices and contracts, enhancing their bargaining power (Chebet et al., 2019). By uniting, SHTFs can challenge private factories' dominance, securing access to premium markets. Advocacy through farmer organizations has also driven policy reforms, such as the 2013 Tea Act amendments, which emphasized transparency and accountability (Wanyonyi & Njeru, 2014). These strategies align with Negotiation Agency Theory, illustrating how SHTFs navigate structural constraints to influence outcomes.

Some private factories and MNCs support SHTFs through training and technical assistance. For instance, programs by companies like Tata Global Beverages provide SHTFs with skills to improve tea quality and productivity, enabling access to better markets (Srivastava, 2018). In Nandi County, private factories partner with organizations like the Rainforest Alliance to offer training, enhancing SHTFs' competitiveness (Smith & Johnson, 2022). These initiatives can foster positive relationships, but their success depends on addressing power imbalances and ensuring SHTFs' needs are prioritized.

While the internal dynamics between smallholder tea farmers (SHTFs) and private factories in Nandi County are critical, a comprehensive understanding of these power relations necessitates incorporating global political economy and global value chain (GVC) perspectives. The Kenyan tea sector is deeply embedded in global markets, where multinational corporations, international trade policies, and certification regimes such as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance impose standards that reshape local production and bargaining power (Gereffi, 2018). These global actors influence pricing, quality requirements, and market access, often reinforcing asymmetries between SHTFs and buyers. Fluctuations in global demand and shifts in foreign investment further complicate local agency, as global forces dictate profitability and sustainability (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009). Integrating GVC theory thus situates local struggles within broader transnational structures.

The politics of SHTFs towards private factories are complex, shaped by both conflict and cooperation. While pricing disputes highlight power asymmetries, cooperatives and supportive programs demonstrate SHTFs' agency and potential for collaboration. Political Economy Theory underscores the structural barriers SHTFs face, while Negotiation Agency Theory highlights their strategic responses. Creating equitable relationships requires policies that strengthen SHTFs' representation, promote transparent pricing, and support sustainable practices, ensuring the tea sector benefits all stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Political Economy Theory and Negotiation Agency Theory to analyze the intricate dynamics between smallholder tea farmers (SHTFs) and private tea factories in Nandi County, Kenya, focusing on power relations, resource allocation, and agency within the tea sector. Political Economy Theory examines the interplay of political and economic forces in shaping resource distribution, institutional frameworks, and power dynamics within society (Gilpin, 1987; Poulantzas, 1978). In Nandi County's tea sector, this theory illuminates two key dimensions. First, power dynamics and resource allocation are shaped by state policies, such as the Tea Act of 1959 (revised in 2013 and 2021), which sets the regulatory framework for SHTFs and private factories. Private factories, leveraging their financial resources and proximity to policymakers, exert significant influence over policy formulation, often prioritizing their business interests (Laven & Berry, 2018; Vorley et al., 2012). This creates an uneven playing field, as SHTFs rely on intermediaries like the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA), which may dilute their voice (Grossman & Helpman, 1994). Biased policy formulation, influenced by private factories or policymakers with financial ties to corporate entities, can undermine state legitimacy in the eyes of SHTFs (Oduor, 2022). For instance, policies limiting independent processors' market entry exacerbate inequalities, underscoring the need for inclusive policymaking to balance stakeholder interests (Robinson, 2006).

Second, market competition and capital accumulation highlight how private factories' adoption of mechanization and diverse tea varieties (e.g., green, blue, purple tea) strengthens their dominance at the Mombasa Tea Auction, fetching higher prices than SHTFs' black CTC tea (Ndegwa et al., 2024). This aligns with Political Economy Theory's focus on capital accumulation, where private actors prioritize profit maximization, often marginalizing resource-constrained SHTFs (Burgess et al., 2006). The Tea Act (2021) fosters competition by allowing SHTFs to supply multiple factories and access overseas buyers, potentially increasing their bargaining power (Falleti & Lynch, 2007). However, the state's enforcement of these regulations is critical to prevent private factories from exploiting their market power to dictate lower prices for SHTF tea leaves. Concerns about policy capture arise when policymakers with financial ties to private companies prioritize corporate interests, highlighting the need for transparency and accountability to ensure a balanced tea sector (Grossman & Helpman, 1994).

Negotiation Agency Theory explores how actors in subordinate positions exercise agency to navigate power structures and advance their interests (Fisher & Ury, 1981; Kriesberg, 2007). For SHTFs, this theory explains their strategies to counter private factory dominance and advocate for equitable outcomes. SHTF strategies for agency include collective bargaining through cooperatives, which enable SHTFs to pool resources, negotiate better prices, and reduce reliance on intermediaries like the KTDA (Chebet et al., 2019). These cooperatives enhance SHTFs' bargaining power, allowing them to secure fairer deals with private factories and access premium markets (Oxfam, 2018). Additionally, advocacy and representation through lobbying and farmer organizations have enabled SHTFs to influence policy reforms, as evidenced by their role in the 2013 Tea Act amendments, which prioritized transparency and accountability (Wanyonyi & Njeru, 2014).

SHTFs also leverage technology and training, often provided by private factories or organizations like the Rainforest Alliance, to improve farming practices and tea quality (Smith & Johnson, 2022). By adopting new technologies and diversifying tea varieties, SHTFs enhance their competitiveness, aligning with Negotiation Agency Theory's emphasis on strategic adaptation. However, constraints on agency persist, including structural disadvantages such as limited resources, reliance on labor-intensive methods, and lack of direct access to policymakers (Liu & Zhang, 2020). These constraints hinder SHTFs' ability to compete with well-funded private factories that benefit from mechanization and economies of scale. Furthermore, intermediary dependence on the KTDA or elected representatives can weaken SHTFs' negotiating power, as intermediaries may not fully align with their interests (Wiggins, 2011). Strengthening cooperative leadership and ensuring direct representation are critical to amplifying SHTF agency within the tea sector.

By integrating Political Economy Theory and Negotiation Agency Theory, this framework provides a comprehensive lens to analyze the power imbalances, institutional constraints, and strategic agency of SHTFs in their interactions with private tea factories in Nandi County.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research methodology employed. The methodology encompasses the research design, philosophical approach, strategy, study area, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, validity and reliability measures, data analysis plan, presentation methods, and ethical considerations. This study adopts an explanatory design triangulated with a historical approach, tailored to Political Economy Theory and Negotiation Agency Theory, to examine the interplay of power, policy, and agency in the tea sector.

The explanatory design enables an in-depth exploration of the political and economic dynamics affecting SHTFs, focusing on their negotiations with private factories and the state. It is particularly suited for analyzing complex issues, such as how policies shape resource distribution and how SHTFs assert agency within these constraints (Yin, 2002). The historical design complements this by tracing the evolution of SHTF-private factory interactions from 2000 to 2024, capturing shifts in policy, market competition, and farmer strategies. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted from April 1 to April 24, 2023, with SHTFs, KTDA executives, and private factory managers, alongside document analysis to contextualize historical and current dynamics. This dual approach allowed the study to assess whether benefits, such as market access for private factories, outweigh burdens on SHTFs, such as unfair pricing or limited bargaining power, within the political economy of the tea sector.

This study adopts a constructivist philosophy, aligned with Political Economy Theory's emphasis on power dynamics and Negotiation Agency Theory's focus on actors' agency within structural constraints. Constructivism posits that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants, making it ideal for exploring SHTFs' lived experiences and their negotiations with private factories and state policies.

Using a constructivist lens, the study employed semi-structured interviews to co-create knowledge with participants, capturing their perspectives on issues like pricing, land access, and private factory influence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach facilitated an examination of how political and economic structures, such as the Tea Act (2021), shape SHTFs' realities, while also highlighting their agency in navigating these structures through collective bargaining or advocacy. The constructivist philosophy supports the study's aim to understand the moral and practical implications of power imbalances in the tea industry, assessing whether burdens on SHTFs (e.g., limited market access) are justified by broader economic benefits (e.g., industry growth).

This study employs a retroductive strategy, which integrates Political Economy Theory's focus on structural contexts (e.g., state policies, market dynamics) with Negotiation Agency Theory's emphasis on causal mechanisms (e.g., SHTFs' strategies) and outcomes (e.g., productivity and welfare). The retroductive approach analyzes:

State as Context: Government policies, such as the Tea Act, articulate accumulation (e.g., private factory profits) and legitimacy concerns (e.g., equitable treatment of SHTFs).

Causal Mechanisms: SHTFs' political learning and layering strategies, such as forming cooperatives or lobbying for policy reforms, reflect their agency in negotiating power imbalances.

Outcomes: The impact on SHTFs' productivity and welfare, evaluated through the lens of proportionality (e.g., balancing private factory gains with farmer well-being).

This strategy facilitated a rich exploration of SHTFs' experiences within Nandi County's tea sector, using multiple data sources (interviews, documents) to capture power dynamics and agency. Interviews conducted from April 1 to April 24, 2023, provided insights into SHTFs' negotiations with private factories, while document analysis contextualized historical policy shifts. This approach aligns with articulation theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), which examines how power relations are discursively constructed, and Negotiation Agency Theory (Gelfand & Brett, 2004), which highlights SHTFs' strategies to influence decision-making processes within the tea industry.

The study was conducted in Nandi County, located in Kenya's North Rift, covering 2,884.4 square kilometers. With Kapsabet as its capital, the county includes towns like Kaiboi, Mosoriot, Kibiyet, and Nandi Hills. Geographically, it is bounded by the Equator to the south and extends to latitude 0°34'N, with its western boundary reaching westward. The Nandi Hills dominate the county's landscape, making it a key tea-producing region ideal for studying SHTF-private factory dynamics.

The target population is outlined in Table 3.1, reflecting stakeholder's central to the tea sector's political economy and negotiation dynamics.

Table 1.1: Population of the Study

Group	Description
Household heads engaged in smallholder tea farming	Individuals actively involved in smallholder tea production.
Executives of KTDA	Leaders within the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA).
Private factory managers	Managers of private tea factories in Nandi County.

Sampling Techniques

To capture the political and economic dynamics of SHTF-private factory interactions, the study employed a mixed sampling approach, combining probability and non-probability techniques. Probability sampling, including simple random sampling and stratified random sampling, was used to select household heads based on farm size, region, and socio-economic status, ensuring representativeness and reducing bias (Levine, 2014). Non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, targeted KTDA executives and private factory managers to gain insights into their roles in policy formulation and market dynamics. This mixed approach aligns with Political Economy Theory by capturing diverse perspectives within the power structure and Negotiation Agency Theory by including actors who influence or are influenced by SHTFs' agency.

Despite the benefits of probability sampling, challenges such as time and cost were addressed by focusing stratified sampling on key subgroups (Kothari, 2004). Technology and local resources streamlined the process, ensuring a comprehensive yet feasible sample. A sample size of 45 was determined based on data saturation, where no new themes emerged after approximately 40 interviews. The sample was distributed across 12 strata, as detailed in Table 3.2, to ensure diversity in regions, socio-economic backgrounds, and stakeholder roles. This

size balanced depth with practical constraints like time and budget, aligning with qualitative studies in agriculture (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1.2: Total Sample Size

S/no	Strata	Interviewees
1	Aldai	9
2–5	Chesumei, Emgwen, Nandi Hills, Tindiret	7 each
6	KTDA directors	2
7	KTDA managers, EPK factory managers, Nandi Tea factory managers, Mbogo Valley factory managers, Williamson factory managers, DL Koisagat factory managers	1 each
Total		45

Factories in Nandi County, including KTDA-managed (Chebut, Kaptumo) and private factories (e.g., Eastern Produce Kenya's Savanni, Chemomi, and others), were represented through interviews with managers and directors. The study used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, complemented by secondary data from government reports, academic journals, and historical documents. These methods align with Political Economy Theory by capturing the structural and power dynamics of the tea sector and Negotiation Agency Theory by exploring SHTFs' agency in navigating these dynamics.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted from April 1 to April 24, 2023, with 45 participants, including SHTFs, KTDA executives, and private factory managers. This method allowed flexibility to probe issues like pricing, land access, and private factory influence, providing rich insights into SHTFs' experiences and negotiation strategies (Kothari, 2004). To mitigate subjectivity, multiple data sources were triangulated, including interviews and document analysis, to cross-verify findings.

Secondary data was sourced from published materials (e.g., government reports, journals) and unpublished sources (e.g., organizational records). These provided historical and contextual insights into policy evolution and market dynamics, complementing primary data. While secondary data offered a broader perspective, its reliability was evaluated to ensure relevance and accuracy, addressing potential biases or outdated information (Bryman, 2016).

The study employed a qualitative explanatory design with a retroductive strategy, using content and thematic analysis to examine data. Content analysis identified state policies and private factory practices as contexts shaping SHTF experiences, while thematic analysis uncovered patterns related to SHTFs' agency and outcomes like productivity and welfare. NVIVO software facilitated coding, using a hybrid approach (inductive and deductive) to categorize data into themes aligned with the research objectives (Fereday & Cochrane, 2006).

Ensuring credibility (validity) and dependability (reliability) is critical in qualitative research (Gibbs, 2007). Triangulation of data sources (interviews, documents) enhanced credibility by corroborating findings (Denzin, 1978). Member checking involved participants reviewing interpretations to minimize bias. Inter-coder reliability, where multiple researchers coded data independently, ensured consistency, addressing discrepancies to strengthen dependability. Detailed methodological descriptions and audit trails further supported the research's trustworthiness.

Ethical considerations prioritized participant well-being, following Punch (2005). Participants (SHTFs, KTDA executives, private factory managers) provided voluntary consent after receiving written explanations of the study's purpose, methods, risks, and benefits. Anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms, and data was stored

securely. Participants could withdraw at any time and had opportunities to address concerns, fostering trust and integrity in the research process.

The methodology, while robust, has limitations:

The retroductive strategy and focus on Nandi County may limit generalizability, though the in-depth insights are valuable for similar contexts.

Semi-structured interviews risk researcher bias, mitigated through triangulation and member checking.

The sample size (45) may not fully capture marginalized groups' experiences (e.g., women farmers), suggesting a need for future purposive sampling.

Secondary data may lack relevance or accuracy, requiring careful evaluation.

These limitations highlight opportunities for future research to broaden the scope and refine methods.

Political Duels and cooperation: Smallholder Tea Farmers and Private Tea Factories in Nandi County

Overview

This section examines the intricate relationship between smallholder tea farmers (SHTFs) and private tea factories in Nandi County, a key tea-producing region in Kenya. It explores how political negotiations, shaped by government policies, market competition, training initiatives, and technological advancements, influence their interactions. The Kenyan tea industry, a vital economic pillar, operates within a complex framework where SHTFs and private factories navigate a dynamic and often challenging relationship. The Tea Act of 1959, revised multiple times, including significant amendments in 2013 and 2021, established the regulatory framework, placing SHTFs under the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) to provide infrastructure, extension services, and market access. These revisions, driven by SHTF advocacy for transparency and accountability, reflect their efforts to secure greater control over their produce and a fairer share of profits.

SHTFs Politics with state Rules of the Game

This section focuses on government policies, particularly the Tea Act of 2021, which shapes the tea industry's operational landscape. The Act promotes competition by allowing SHTFs to supply different factories and connect directly with overseas buyers, enhancing their bargaining power and potential revenue (Falleti & Lynch, 2007). The 2013 amendments emphasized transparency and accountability to protect SHTF interests, creating a structured environment for equitable operations. These policies aim to balance the influence of private factories and SHTFs, fostering a competitive yet fair tea sector.

Operational Rules

Government policies significantly influence the Kenyan tea sector, affecting all stakeholders (Mwangi & Muriuki, 2017). The following table summarizes key policy dynamics and stakeholder concerns:

Table 1.1: Government Policies and Stakeholder Concerns

Government Policies	Description	Actors' Securitizing/Politicizing/Advocacy	Respondents
Policy formation	Removing policy barriers	Government and private factories	11th, 44th Managers
Policy formulation	Resources and influence	Government and private factories	26th, 29th Managers

Impact of biased policy formulation	Value for labor	Government and private factories	26th Manager
Nature of policies	Protective mechanisms	Government and private factories	11th Manager
Policy implementation	Conflict of interest	SHTFs	21st, 22nd SHTFs
Outcomes	Key players	Government and private factories	-
Source: Field Data (2023)			

The table highlights concerns about private factories' influence on policy formulation, which can create uneven power dynamics (Laven & Berry, 2018). SHTFs often lack direct channels to voice grievances, relying on intermediaries like the KTDA, which may weaken their position. Private factories leverage their resources and proximity to policymakers, potentially shaping policies to favor their interests, such as limiting competition from independent processors (26th & 29th Interviewees, April 13 & 15, 2023). This dynamic underscores the need for transparent and inclusive policymaking to ensure equitable outcomes for SHTFs. Cooperatives and advocacy organizations are increasingly vital for empowering SHTFs, enabling collective bargaining and better market access (Chebet et al., 2019; Oxfam, 2018). Conflicts of interest among policymakers with ties to private companies further complicate fair policy formulation (21st & 22nd Interviewees, April 11, 2023).

SHTFs Politics with Strategies of Control at the Private Factory

This section explores SHTFs' strategies to counter private factory policies and assert their interests. Policies like direct sales to overseas buyers and flexible factory selection reduce reliance on intermediaries, fostering competition. SHTFs employ organizational strategies, such as forming farmer-led agencies to bypass traditional channels and access better prices. Training in negotiation skills and technological advancements, such as improved farming techniques and data analysis, enhance SHTFs' competitiveness. Cooperatives facilitate access to new technologies, improving tea quality and yields to strengthen market positions.

Competition

The Kenyan tea industry is marked by intense competition, particularly at the Mombasa Tea Auction, where private factories' superior funding and mechanization give them an edge over SHTFs (Ndegwa et al., 2024). The following table outlines key priorities:

Table 1.2: Priorities for the Kenyan Tea Sector

Key Tenets	Description	Respondents
Fair play	Well-funded, produce quality leaves	11th, 12th Managers
Innovation	Varieties of tea	2nd SHTF
Source: Field Data (2023)		

Private factories fetch higher prices due to mechanized plucking and diverse tea varieties (e.g., green, blue, purple tea), unlike the black CTC tea dominant among SHTFs (11th & 12th Interviewees, April 6, 2023). This creates market dominance, disadvantaging SHTFs and fostering mistrust (Liu & Zhang, 2020). Cooperatives could enhance SHTFs' bargaining power, enabling resource pooling and reduced dependence on private factories.

Training by Private Factory

Training initiatives by private factories aim to improve SHTF efficiency and sustainability. The following table summarizes collaboration and feedback:

Table 1.3: Collaboration and Feedback

Training Issue	Description	Actors' Securitizing/Politicizing/Advocacy	Respondents
Partnerships	Support farmers through training	Private factories	26th Manager
Capacity building	Equipping farmers with up-to-date knowledge	Private factories	29th Manager
Extension services	Technical advice on agriculture	Government, private factories	42nd Manager
Feedback	Training enhances agroforestry	SHTFs	17th, 36th, 38th SHTFs
Source: Field Data (2023)			

Private factories partner with SHTFs, offering training on modern farming methods, tea varieties, and inputs like fertilizers and seedlings (26th Interviewee, April 13, 2023). These initiatives, often in collaboration with organizations like the Rainforest Alliance, improve tea quality and access to premium markets. Training enhances livelihoods, with factories supporting community projects like schools and water systems (Gesimba et al., 2005). However, private factories' profit-driven motives may prioritize supply chain efficiency over broader sustainability goals (Kirsten et al., 2009). State-driven extension services, while valuable, often lack farmer-centric approaches, highlighting the need for tailored, collaborative programs (42nd Interviewee, April 21, 2023).

Technological Advancement by Private Factories

Technological advancements, particularly mechanization, give private factories a competitive edge. The following table highlights modernization efforts:

Table 1.4: Modernization and Technology Adoption

Key Tenets	Description	Actors Securitizing/Politicizing/Advocacy	Respondents
Mechanization	Boosted productivity	Private factories	29th Manager
Investment in technology	Economic growth	Private factories, KTDA	20th Manager
Source: Field Data (2023)			

Mechanization enhances productivity and quality, benefiting private factories' global competitiveness (29th Interviewee, April 15, 2023). However, it may reduce labor opportunities for SHTFs, exacerbating inequalities (Burgess et al., 2006). Private factories' investments also drive local economic growth through job creation and infrastructure development (20th Interviewee, April 10, 2023). The state must balance these advancements with policies ensuring sustainable practices and SHTF welfare to maintain industry legitimacy and equity.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between smallholder tea farmers (SHTFs) and private tea factories in Nandi County is shaped by a dynamic interplay of government policies, market competition, training initiatives, and technological advancements. The Tea Act of 2021 and prior amendments aim to empower SHTFs through enhanced competition and transparency, but private factories' influence on policymaking often creates power imbalances, limiting SHTFs' representation. While private factories contribute to industry growth through mechanization, diverse tea varieties, and training, their profit-driven strategies can marginalize SHTFs by reducing labor opportunities and creating market disadvantages. Cooperatives and farmer-led agencies are vital for SHTFs to improve bargaining power and market access. The state must balance private interests with SHTF welfare, addressing conflicts of interest and improving extension services to ensure equitable policymaking. The sustainability and fairness of the tea sector hinge on collaborative efforts to promote inclusive representation, equitable resource access, and sustainable practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen SHTF Representation: Promote the formation of cooperatives and advocacy groups to ensure SHTFs' voices are heard in policy discussions, securing their interests in legislative frameworks like the Tea Act.

Enhance Transparency in Policymaking: Establish mechanisms, such as mandatory disclosures of policymakers' ties to private companies, to prevent conflicts of interest and foster equitable policy formulation.

Promote Farmer-Centric Extension Services: Develop training programs with research institutions tailored to SHTFs' needs, emphasizing sustainable farming and small-scale technology adoption.

Support SHTF Diversification: Provide incentives and training for SHTFs to produce diverse tea varieties (e.g., green, blue, purple tea) to boost competitiveness at the Mombasa Tea Auction.

Balance Mechanization with SHTF Welfare: Create policies enabling SHTFs' access to affordable mechanization technologies to enhance productivity while minimizing labor displacement.

Foster Public-Private Partnerships: Encourage equitable collaborations between private factories, SHTFs, and the state to ensure fair pricing, access to premium markets, and community development.

Ensure Sustainable Industry Practices: Develop state policies on mechanization and environmental sustainability to maintain the Kenyan tea sector's global competitiveness while safeguarding SHTF livelihoods.

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