

# **The Kerala Decentralisation Experiment: Achievements, Origins, and Implications**

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# **The Kerala Decentralisation Experiment: Achievements, Origins, and Implications**

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The Kerala People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan constitutes a remarkable radical experiment in democracy. The campaign has not just decentralised functions of a government bureaucracy; it has decentralised planning while mobilising the energy of hundreds of thousands of activists and volunteers to go beyond what government-funded projects can accomplish. The Campaign has generated procedures to insure delivery of project funds to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations who previously often did not receive them. It has brought about special projects for women and simultaneously encouraged women elected officials and activists to participate more fully and effectively in public life. It has created conditions for eliminating or drastically reducing corruption in several areas of government spending. It has rationalised procedures for all kinds of projects and programs. It has raised consciousness about environmental issues in development planning in Kerala. It has promoted and supported the spontaneous release of local initiatives in areas such as neighbourhood groups that hold promise for even deeper decentralisation and for strengthening of community and civil society. The Campaign has also given training to thousands of local officials and activists in what must be one of the most extensive adult education and empowerment programs ever conducted. Most remarkably perhaps, from the very outset the Campaign planned its own demise by setting up a committee to arrange its institutionalisation—the organisers were acutely aware that there are time limits on mass mobilisation; they are routinising the charisma they so painstakingly created. They did all this not in a revolutionary setting but in the period of one ministry (1996-2001) in a parliamentary democracy.

The remarkable features of Kerala's Ninth Plan Campaign make it worthy of study by everyone interested in building a more just, egalitarian, democratic, and sustainable future for the world and all its people. In this paper we will discuss three aspects of the Campaign. In the first section we will summarise the main achievements of the campaign. Then we will survey the background to its creation that coincides with our own 14 years of research in Kerala. Finally, we will contrast the Kerala Campaign with certain disturbing worldwide trends and with the prescriptions for decentralisation emanating from some of the most powerful institutions of the first world.

## **1. Achievements of the People's Campaign**

On table 1 we show what we see as the 18 major achievements of the Campaign.<sup>1</sup> We order them numerically by their chronological occurrence in the campaign, but we shall discuss them in each of five categories of importance for democratic governance: decentralisation, people's participation, improving government, improving the quality of

life, and sustainability. Where the achievements cut across categories we emphasise the most significant one; the achievements tend to reinforce each other so that the table represents an artificial categorisation intended solely for analytical purposes.

**Table 1: Events and Achievements of the Kerala People's Campaign  
1996-2000**

Event Number	Achievement	Significance for Democratic Governance and Development
1	Devolve 35-40% of state plan funds to local units	Decentralisation
2	Grama sabha attendance by nearly 3 million adults	People's Participation
3	Empowerment Through Small group meetings with Semi-structured Discussion Format	People's Participation
4	Collect local data and conduct transect walks	People's Participation
5	Write Panchayat Development Reports and Conduct Development Seminars	People's Participation
6	Draft, Appraise, Prioritise, and Implement Projects and Plans	People's Participation
7	Reduce or Eliminate Corruption	Improve Government
8	Physical Achievements	Improve Quality of Life
9	Reduce cynicism; Mobilise Volunteer Labour and Materials to Increase Project Inputs by 10%	Improve Quality of Life
10	Women's projects, women's involvement	Improve Quality of Life
11	Deliver funds to SC/ST	Improve Quality of Life
12	Training—Mass Education	Sustainability
13	Emergence of Exceptional Panchayats that Could Inspire Others	Sustainability
14	Division of Plan Priorities at Different Levels	Improve Government
15	Institutionalise Campaign Through Sen Committee Legislation	Sustainability
16	Spontaneous Creation of Neighbourhood Groups	People's Participation
17	Panchayat Computerisation	Improve Government
18	Raise Environmental Issues, Start Watershed Awareness	Sustainability

**Event 1—Decentralisation: Devolve 35-40% of State Plan Funds to Local Bodies.** The decision of the 1996 elected Left Democratic Front (LDF) Ministry to send down 35-40% of the plan funds to the villages and municipal bodies was revolutionary. Campaign organisers realised that decentralisation could only be meaningful if it was big. In the 8th 5-year plan of 1991-96, allocation of an “untied” fund of 2.35% of the plan to the local bodies (meaning they could spend it as they chose) followed a similar program of the 1987-91 LDF ministry to award grama (village) panchayats and municipal wards small amounts to fund projects without following cumbersome state budgeting procedures.

**Events 2-6, and 16: People's Participation.** One-third of the entire People's Campaign events can be labeled as People's Participation. This participation was a genuine exercise in empowerment in which ordinary citizens, elected representatives, retired volunteer technical experts, and eventually government departmental bureaucrats talked about problems, studied resources, then drafted, prioritised, appraised, implemented, and monitored projects leading to local development plans in all 990 rural panchayats, 152

development blocks, 58 municipalities and corporations, and 14 districts. These 1,214 local bodies represent the three levels or tiers of the Campaign.<sup>2</sup>

*Event 2: The grama sabhas.* The first step in people's participation was the grama sabhas or local assemblies. To get people out to the grama sabhas, Campaign organisers utilised newspaper, radio, and television, local conventions of political and mass organisations, women's and Dalit community leaders, posters and exhibitions, school quizzes, musical performances, street theatre, padayathras, traditional drum announcements, coconut oil lamp processions, and hand-written invitations delivered to each household in the ward. Two million persons attended the first grama sabhas of August-December 1996. In the second set 6 months later there were 1.8 million and in the third 2.1 million.<sup>3</sup> These numbers equal 10-11% of the voting age population and perhaps 20-30% of households represented in the first three grama sabhas from September-December 1996 through September 1997.

*Event 3: Empowering the Deliberations.* People can attend meetings without effectively participating. A major achievement of Kerala's Campaign was to devise and implement methods to encourage the involvement of ordinary people. At the grama sabhas, speeches by politicians were limited to 30 minutes with another 40 minutes for expert presentations. The next two hours were taken up by small group discussions in twelve topic areas where people could voice their needs. Trained facilitators encouraged the discussions to go beyond things people felt were obvious—for example in the agriculture topic group people talked about how low market prices and high wages made rice farming unprofitable. The facilitator then tried to push the discussion into areas such as crop and land productivity, irrigation, soil fertility, and environmental problems such as waterlogging. The idea was to tap local knowledge and to challenge local farmers to think about issues beyond their daily complaints. The small groups then reassembled in a plenary to hear reports and elect representatives to the next Campaign stage.

*Event 4: Evaluating Local Resources.* People's participation continued with a series of data collection activities and the writing of PDRs—local panchayat and urban development reports—that are perhaps unique in the history of decentralisation and of third world development generally. Campaign activists organised visits to local government offices where people gathered information on their panchayats; others interviewed elderly members of the community on local history, with emphasis on how past struggles had brought beneficial changes; 75% of the panchayats carried out a “transect walk,” in which they marked major environmental features of their village and identified resources available for solving the problems enunciated in the grama sabhas.

*Event 5: Write PDRs and Conduct Development Seminars.* The PDRs constitute one of the greatest self-education/self-study projects in recent history. Running from 75 to 200 pages and with printing paid from local contributions, many are gems of artistic layout and sophisticated analysis of issues. The PDRs provided the discussion documents for the development seminars. In this stage of people's participation about 20 persons per ward—elected earlier from the grama sabhas—met to make recommendations for projects. As with the grama sabhas, politicians' speeches were held to a minimum and small group discussions were organised so that real interaction among local people could take place.

*Event 6: Draft, Appraise, Implement, and Monitor Projects and Plans.* The development seminars created task forces charged with drafting actual project proposals that would include any required technical specifications and financial accounting. A remarkable innovation of the Kerala experiment was the mobilisation of retired experts

to assist in the technical and financial appraisal of the projects. The 4,000 “Volunteer Technical Corps” (VTC) members included engineers, doctors, professors, and other professionals for whom the Campaign became a means both of coming out of retirement and of bringing personal satisfaction to their lives. With the plans drafted, appraised, and approved, implementation also benefited from the knowledge and skills of the VTC; many supported and advised the local monitoring committees.

*Event 16: Neighbourhood Groups.* As the Campaign evolved, people’s participation took a new turn when over 200 panchayats began forming “Neighbourhood Groups” (NHGs). With around 2,000 adults, the wards in which the grama sabhas are organised were still rather large for effective community interaction, especially in Kerala where households tend to be widely dispersed. The felt need for greater local involvement led to the formation of groups of 40-50 households, represented often by women, who meet weekly or biweekly to discuss development issues to bring to the grama sabhas, but with additional topics that include family or other problems that impact on the neighbourhood. Many of the NHGs have set up local revolving thrift funds that might evolve into small-scale co-operatives that could provide jobs in Kerala’s high-unemployment economy.

**Events 7, 14, and 17. Improve Government.** Most observers consider improvement in government to mean increased efficiency. The Campaign has three major achievements in this area.

*Event 7: Reduce or Eliminate Corruption.* The Campaign has drastically reduced corruption through instituting public beneficiary selection in the grama sabhas where transparency is easier to achieve. It has replaced patron-client mechanisms for project appraisal and technical approval with VTC and District Planning Committee bodies that are far more difficult to co-opt.

*Event 14: Division of Plan Priorities.* Changing priorities and divisions among levels indicate that the Campaign is directing government services and investment more specifically to the point of need than central or state-level planning could achieve. A functional division is emerging among the various levels of local government. The state government keeps plan funds at the state level for major electrical power generation projects and certain industrial projects requiring statewide solutions and massive investment. Otherwise, local bodies are supplanting state programs in areas where local plans are more appropriate. In the first year of the Campaign, villages and municipalities gave 14.5% of service sector finance to build housing, while the State plan had only 1.4% for that purpose. Local bodies spent 13% on improvements in sanitation and drinking water compared with 7.5% in the 8th 5-year plan of 1991-96. *Event 17:*

*Panchayat Computerisation.* Kerala is embarking on an ambitious program to provide a computer in every panchayat linked to all the others and to the State Planning Board. Computerisation has already been tested in Kumarakom Panchayat where the administration finds it useful for maintaining voter and pension lists and providing immediate birth and death certificates. Providing certificates at the click of a mouse reduces several steps in the process where bribes could be requested, thus streamlining services and making them less corruptible at the same time.

**Events 8-11. Improve Quality of Life.** The Campaign has improved the quality of life in Kerala in several ways.

*Event 8: Physical Achievements.* In its first two years, the Campaign led to construction of 98,494 houses, 240,307 sanitary latrines, 17,489 public taps, and 50,162

wells. These are substantially greater numbers than for previous plans. Seeing how well they could do, local bodies in several districts are contemplating a total shelter programme for 2001. By 2003 organisers consider it possible that Kerala could achieve sanitary latrines for all, universal access to pre-primary education, and safe drinking water within 200 metres of every home in the state.

*Event 9: Reduce Cynicism—Increase Voluntarism.* The remarkable physical achievements and the meaningful democratic participation have unleashed a spirit of optimism that is replacing the cynicism towards government experienced by many in the past. Numerous surveys indicate that Campaign participants feel more positive, more skilled and experienced, and empowered by the Campaign to make real changes in their communities. The successful mobilisation of 4,000 VTC volunteers is evidence of the increasing interest of Keralites in the Campaign. Campaign plan documents indicate a 10% increase in resource availability for projects because of material and labour donations. The spontaneous emergence of the neighbourhood groups we noted earlier, is a further sign of the optimism spreading across the state.

*Event 10: Women's Projects, Women's Involvement.* The Women Component Plan (WCP) is a unique feature of Kerala's democratic decentralisation. Requiring a gender effects evaluation of every project and a commitment of 10% of projects to benefit women only, the WCP has led to projects in vegetable gardening, sewing co-operatives, mobilisation of anganawady (preschool) personnel, and construction of new anganawady buildings to create community centres for women. Combined with the national policy of a 1/3 reservation for women in elected local positions, the WCP is generating conditions for women to play more active roles in public life in Kerala. This could lead to increased gender equality.

*Event 11: Deliver Project Funds to SC/ST.* The Campaign has succeeded in delivering a greater percentage than previously of project funds to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities (SC/ST) that make up 12% of Kerala's rural population. Budget documents from the Campaign indicate that the local governmental units lowered the beneficiary contributions among the SC/ST beneficiaries. They also responded to the felt needs of those groups: 32% of SC and 30% of ST projects were for housing—the most pressing need of these formerly oppressed groups. Both the WCP and the SC/ST elements of the Campaign have the potential of reducing major sources of inequality in Kerala.

***Events 12-13, 15, and 18. Sustainability.*** The People's Campaign displays at least four major types of sustainability.

*Event 12: Training.* In the first year of the Campaign, 373 state level trainers taught 10,497 district level resource persons who conducted one-day workshops for over 100,000 local activists who became the backbone of the initial stages of the Campaign. In 1998, specialised training in particular development sectors was offered by 545 state level faculty to 4,950 district trainers who offered workshops to 93,000 participants. In 1999-2000 additional mass training is being given, including a series of 3-day workshops for women activists and women elected representatives. Training involves creation of specialised handbooks by topic, lectures and discussions, and field visits. The People's Campaign training constitutes one of the largest adult education programs undertaken anywhere in the world.

*Event 13: Exceptional Panchayats and Experience Sharing.* An element of the training is the series of Experience Sharing Workshops in which exemplary panchayats

can provide information and inspiration to others. In 1999-2000 at least 22 such workshops have been organised on topics ranging from total transparency and small-scale drinking water co-operatives, to micro-hydroelectric generation, total sanitation, integrated pest management, computerisation, vegetable production, and suicide prevention.

*Event 15: Sen Committee Institutionalisation of the Campaign.* Shortly after coming to power in 1996, the LDF Ministry in Kerala set up the Sen Committee to conduct hearings and investigations and recommend legislation that would institutionalise the processes and procedures of decentralisation. This Committee issued its report in 1999 and by the end of that year the government had amended most of the appropriate legislation according to its recommendations. Much of what has been happening as a mass movement will gradually be replaced by regulations and procedures to encode the new relations among government levels and between the government and the people that the Campaign has generated. The amount of the plan budget to be devolved, however, remains a political decision of each elected statewide ministry.

*Event 18: Environmental Sustainability.* Long-term sustainability cannot be merely political, technical, and administrative. The Campaign has made only initial efforts at environmental planning. A few panchayats set up bio-diversity gardens and bird sanctuaries. In the third year of the Campaign a major effort has been made to delineate watersheds and utilise the block panchayats to prepare watershed master plans integrating multiple grama panchayats. Other environmental issues such as protecting coastlines and cleaning up polluted rivers remain to be taken up.

This brief survey of the first three years of the Campaign shows that much has been accomplished. The pieces are in place for a long-term march towards sustainable, equality-oriented, and more deeply democratic communities in Kerala.

## **2. Origins of the Campaign**

How did this remarkable experiment come about? Why didn't the LDF ministry opt for a safe and conservative administrative decentralisation? What constellation of social and historical forces led them to devolve so much of the state budget to communities where no tradition for local planning existed? Why organise a mass campaign, and count on the skills and energy of ordinary people to make it work? In our view four factors combined to generate the People's Campaign:

- Kerala's long-term achievements in bringing a high material quality of life to its people even at low levels of economic development—the well-known “Kerala Model.”
- A vibrant civil society combined with political parties that are cadre organisations capable of mobilising people for activities beyond voting.
- A recent history of what Kerala activists call “micro-experiments” that showed the power of local initiatives and developed specific case materials that organisers could insert into the Campaign.
- A conjunction of historical events that created a “perfect” moment in which to take the plunge.

***The Kerala Model.*** The Kerala Model is the foundation stone on which the Campaign was erected. Over much of the 20th century, Kerala's people organised to bring about near first world levels of literacy, life expectancy, birth rates and infant mortality, an

effective public food distribution system, a land reform that undercut the exploitation of the privileged castes, and an agricultural labourers' act that codified wages, working conditions, and benefits (Franke and Chasin 1994; Jeffrey 1993; United Nations 1975).<sup>4</sup> The Kerala Model means that across the state one finds an educated population that has experienced major social reforms in recent times. Such a population could be mobilised for further changes more easily than those who have seen fewer accomplishments.

**Civil Society.** A key element of the Kerala Model was the creation of a strong "civil society."<sup>5</sup> Experts define civil society as "nonprofit, nongovernmental organisations," (Weaver *et al* 1997:208) or as "the domain between government and market" (Barber 1998:33). Robert Putnam (1993) showed through comparing regions in Italy that where civil society was strongest, government was most effective and most positively viewed by citizens. In Kerala, thousands of nonprofit, nongovernmental organisations fill the space between government and market. These include trade unions, caste associations, temple committees, farmers' groups, women's groups, and youth organisations. Every Kerala village has a library and library committee, and many have additional reading rooms connected to sports clubs and theatre groups. Perhaps a third of the population has some experience interacting with others in organisations where they experience trust and co-operation with their neighbours or fellow workers. The background of the Kerala Model and the rich tradition of civil society help to explain the rapid response to the call for VTC activists when 4,000 gave of their technical expertise.

**Micro-experiments.** From about 1986 to the beginning of the Campaign, in many parts of Kerala, people undertook local community initiatives to try to solve some of the state's nagging economic and environmental problems. Our own research in Kerala began in 1986, allowing us to observe firsthand parts of the unfolding sequence of projects that generated the confidence of activists by 1996 to attempt the large-scale decentralised planning experiment we witness today.

**Nadur Village.** Our observations began in 1986-87 when we carried out 8 months' field research in Nadur Village in Central Kerala. Still studying the old Kerala Model, we surveyed 170 households that had been studied in 1971 by anthropologist Joan Mencher. We found that in the 16 year period since Mencher's research, income inequality had declined by 17%. The Kerala land reform had expanded rice land ownership from 4% to 28% of households. House garden plot (*paramba*) ownership rose from 8% to 100%. The ration shop effectively raised by 20% the incomes of the poorest 10% of households while those using the school lunch program increased their food intake by 5% at no cost to them. Fifteen percent of households were benefiting from agricultural labourers' pensions that added 17% to their incomes on average. General literacy rose from 60% to 74%, but for the cohort 15-29 years, 93% were literate, and virtually all school-age children were attending classes. Kerala's redistribution programs and public sector investments were making life better for the poorest groups. People put tile and cement roofs on their houses, dug wells, got more electrical connections, and made small gains in ownership of consumer goods. They indicated greater optimism towards the future than in Mencher's 1971 survey.<sup>6</sup>

**The New Democratic Initiatives (NDI).** In March 1987, during our stay in Nadur, the LDF won a majority in the State Legislative Assembly and formed a new ministry. We wondered what new redistribution initiatives would come, but saw only a few increases



in education and health spending, some improvements in the school lunch program, and a hike in the monthly agricultural labourers' pensions. It did not dawn on us at the time that Kerala's left activists were moving in a different direction. Even as we were collecting data that supported the earlier logic of Kerala's previous redistribution policies, activists across Kerala were debating how the energy and commitment of decades of reform struggles could be mobilised and directed towards increasing production. How could the land reform be made more valuable to the former tenants? How could women's equality be promoted and the environment protected—two areas where the left in Kerala had weak records. What were they going to do about India's highest unemployment rate—the one found in Kerala?

We were not aware of these debates at the time, but on our return to Kerala in December-January 1992-93, we discovered they had produced a great deal of activity. The *New Democratic Initiatives* were loosely connected experiments in generating action for development by trying to mobilise Kerala's vast civil society resources and tradition of social activism with some state government co-ordination and minimal support. The initiatives included elected district councils—a first step towards decentralisation—popularisation of high-efficiency stoves (chulhas), the establishment of a nongovernmental research and action centre—the Integrated Rural Technology Centre—a Total Literacy Campaign, the People's Resource Mapping Programme, and the Kalliasseri people's planning experiment.<sup>7</sup>

*High-Efficiency Stoves.* Kerala's high efficiency chulha programme was led by the Kerala People's Science Movement (KSSP), a civil society group with over 45,000 members and a 20-year history in science education and environmental activism. The idea was to improve burning efficiency in order to reduce the emission of suspended particulates within the kitchen, use less wood to reduce the pressure on Kerala's rapidly declining forests, and increase the incomes of low-income households by cutting down on fuel costs. In the process of popularising the chulhas, greater environmental awareness was to develop in low-income households and among activists advocating and installing the chulhas. The KSSP-funded IRTC became the main research site for testing various chulha models and bringing together scientists and villagers to solve problems related to the use of the chulhas in ordinary people's homes.<sup>8</sup> The IRTC appealed to idealistic scientists and engineers to work for low pay but high social rewards in helping to bring about a better Kerala. When we visited IRTC in 1993, we saw that in addition to the chulha project, IRTC was helping to develop experimental programmes for village-level high-efficiency lighting, wind, solar, and micro-hydroelectric power, and the idea of watersheds as units for environmental sustainability. Most of these experiments eventually came into play in the People's Campaign.

*The Total Literacy Campaign.* The NDI that captured the main attention of the people, the media, and the international community was the Total Literacy Programme. In December 1988 KSSP organised a mass campaign to create 100% literacy in Ernakulam District—a trial run for a statewide campaign. To get people involved, they used songs, street plays, public meetings, wall posters, and a massive 5-part jatha (procession) converging on Ernakulam City on 26 January 1989. The thousands of teachers they mobilised and trained used the participatory and reality-based methods of the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire to teach 135,000 of Ernakulam's 174,000 illiterates to read, do simple arithmetic, and understand basics of health, sanitation, and inoculation. A simultaneous immunisation programme brought near 100% levels of protection against measles, TB, diphtheria, and polio. Ernakulam was declared totally

literate in February 1990; an expanded statewide TLC brought total literacy to Kerala in 1991.

With Kerala's high literacy rate, one might ask why mobilise thousands of high school and college students to teach the remaining few thousand mostly elderly, mostly female, mostly SC/ST illiterates to read and write? In our view, the TLC had four major effects. Firstly, it created an environment in which the inoculation programme could reach the people most likely to be missed. Secondly, it showed young people not currently active what a difference they could make by participating in the life of their communities. Thirdly, becoming literate was a means of acquiring self-respect for people who had given much to earlier Kerala struggles but who could no longer participate in social change activities where more than militancy was required. Fourthly, the lowest caste people tended to live on the worst and most inefficiently used parcels of land: if they could learn to read and write, they could be active in future campaigns to go beyond word literacy towards "land literacy."

*The People's Resource Mapping Programme.* Land literacy is what the Peoples Resource Mapping (PRM) Programme was intended to instill. With expertise from professional geographers at Kerala's Center for Earth Science Studies (CESS) and jathas and other mobilisational activities from KSSP, 10 volunteers per ward in 25 panchayats learned how to map their local resources. The maps they drew were supplemented with professional maps made by the geographers. The maps of relief, landform, depth to water table, surface materials, and infrastructure, were combined at CESS to generate an overall environmental appraisal map. The environmental appraisal map was taken back to the village for public discussion to create a development action plan map so that projects to increase production could be evaluated in terms of their environmental impact. The idea of sustainability was introduced in Kerala with this programme.<sup>9</sup>

*The Kalliasseri Decentralised Planning Model.* Kalliasseri Panchayat in northern Kerala carried out the most advanced PRM experiment. When we visited Kalliasseri in 1993, 1997, and 2000, we learned how an experienced KSSP activist and local teacher organised a talented and dedicated group of volunteers who drafted plans to improve water drainage, create a small village forest reserve, and protect steep slopes from erosion. The volunteers designed and carried out a socio-economic survey that led to a dry season vegetable production programme that spread to many households by 1997. They used their maps to identify the best locations for interventions such as an 825 metres long People's Canal that was dug in 24 hours in March 1995, using mass mobilisation through civil society organisations. The canal reclaims 40 acres of rice land and has reduced the mosquito hazard. Kalliasseri set up women's co-operatives with low-interest loans to try to bring gender equality into their development planning. They built a small village hospital and introduced programmes attempting to increase the passing rate for the SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate—a 10 grade graduation certificate). In 1995, Kalliasseri was the subject of a major seminar at the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram and its projects and programmes were described in a major development monograph.<sup>10</sup> The Kalliasseri "micro-"experiment showed that local planning was possible in Kerala.

But Kalliasseri had a drawback. The participatory development experiment there was somewhat artificial: the neighbourhood organisations, local meetings, constitution for a development society, and similar actions had all taken place in the context of a concentrated, conscious attempt to show that people's participation and democratic action could be effective forces in development. What if Kalliasseri was an aberration, a

unique place where organisers created the illusion of decentralised democracy by putting in large amounts of energy in short amounts of time?

*Kerala Dinesh Beedi.* Just along the main highway that runs through a section of Kalliasseri one comes upon a small but clean building where workers are rolling beedis, India's poor peoples' cigarettes. This building is a work centre for Kerala Dinesh Beedi (KDB), a 30-year experiment in decentralised workplace democracy that provided inspiration and insights for the People's Campaign. Spread across much of Kannur District where Kalliasseri is located are KDB's 326 work centres. KDB is one of the largest worker-owned cooperatives in the world.<sup>11</sup> Founded in 1969 during a lockout by private beedi employers, KDB drew on the skills and commitment of the radical workers' culture of the region to survive as a business with its primary commitments being the welfare of its workers and the generation of employment and income for the community. For years it has paid the highest wages and benefits to its worker-owners who numbered 32,000 in 1995. But KDB did more than survive: it grew and prospered despite fierce competition from the private sector. KDB did this under worker ownership and worker-elected management. The 22 primary co-operatives elect their local director boards to manage production while a central co-operative, also worker owned and managed, takes care of raw materials purchase and marketing. KDB has survived several ministries and economic ups and downs, and today is embarking on an ambitious diversification programme into processed foods, spices, and software development to respond to declining tobacco sales.<sup>12</sup>

A major element in KDB's success has been the creation of both representative democracy in the election of managers and participatory democracy on the shop floor. The shop floor democracy is maintained by worker activism channeled through trade union committees. KDB was not an official New Democratic Initiative, but its long-term success inspired decentralisation advocates. If ordinary workers in one of the most exploited industries of India could create a successful co-operative mixing central and decentralised forms of organisation, and if they could maintain their creation for more than two decades, surely local-level democracy was possible. If Kalliasseri's short-term achievements in identifying local resources and creating incipient structures for local participation could be combined with KDB's long-term democratic success, decentralised democracy had an embryonic model. But having all the forces and factors available was not enough to generate a movement for decentralisation. Kalliasseri and KDB were there, the literacy and mapping campaigns had awakened some activism, but civil society and the Kerala model could not launch a movement by themselves.

***A Historical Conjunction.*** The election victory of the LDF in March 1996 came as part of a conjunction of historical processes and events that made the People's Campaign possible. The Central Government had recently passed the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments mandating decentralisation from the states to lower levels of administration and listing 29 functions of government that were to be handed down to local bodies. In Kerala, weak and inconsistent enabling legislation during the UDF ministry in 1994 had generated substantial public opposition and debate. Within the CPI-M, the major party in the LDF, advocates of decentralisation had been carrying out extensive discussions, spearheaded by the venerable Kerala CPI-M theoretician E. M. S. Namboodiripad. On coming to power, CPI-M leaders decided to make the decentralisation campaign the major activity of the new ministry. The Campaign now had the one element it had

lacked—a committed state-level political leadership with access to the resources of the state.

### 3. Implications

Kerala's radical experiment comes at a crucial historical conjuncture itself. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of Eastern European socialism has been followed by a rapidly expanding assault on many of the welfare gains of the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The service sector of many 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries is under attack from World Bank and IMF Structural Adjustment Programs. Decentralisation is offered as a means of creating more efficient use of dwindling state resources, but decentralisation alone may have only limited effects in counterbalancing the loss of state support.

**Decentralisation by International Agencies.** For developing countries the Kerala experiment presents a genuinely democratic alternative to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and to the emphasis on reducing government support for social programs. The Bank (1999a:backcover) claims its "dream is a world free of poverty,"<sup>13</sup> It entitles a chapter in its 1999 *World development report* "Decentralisation: Rethinking Government" (World Bank 1999a:107-124). Another recent Bank publication (1999b), *Beyond the center: decentralizing the state*, analyses decentralisation efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Bank claims several advantages for decentralisation. It can be an institutionalised mechanism for conflict resolution, and a way of making local officials more efficient and more responsive to their constituents. Local governments may be more aware of the problems of the poor and "usually administer services that have important redistributive implications, such as primary health care, education, child care, housing and public transportation" (World Bank 1999a:115). Where civil society associations exist, local (decentralised) governments can add to their impact. But the Bank seems to have a purely administrative idea of decentralisation, noting in its 1999 Report (1999a:110) that along with 5 other Indian states, Kerala has "made progress in devolving powers to local governments." The conservative bureaucratic minds of the bank's staff and consultants do not appear to comprehend decentralisation as a popular movement to transfer power to ordinary people, not just to lower-level officials. The Bank's newly-added appendix on "Decentralization, Urbanization, and the Environment," (1999a:213-22) offers only the following indicators for decentralisation: share of subnational government in total public expenditure, share of subnational government in total tax revenue, subnational elections, number of elected subnational tiers, and number of jurisdictions. Such indicators are woefully inadequate to capture the most important aspects of Kerala's decentralised democratic planning experiment.

Decentralisation, and its synonym localisation, are becoming new development circle buzzwords at the United Nations also. The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (UNCHS, also called Habitat) is stressing the "vital contribution" local democracy can make "to the improvement of people's living conditions in all continents and regions" (UN 1993:2).<sup>14</sup>

***Dictated Decentralisation?*** International discussions of decentralisation often ignore one of the most salient facts about the world today. Thoroughly undemocratic organisations such as the World Bank and IMF are dictating the abdication of state responsibility for

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the general welfare. Paradoxically, democratically-elected governments in many countries are being told by authoritarian international organisations to transfer more power to lower levels in the name of democracy. Administrative decentralisation may result, but the entire mix of policies is threatening many of the most vulnerable populations.<sup>15</sup> The same agencies dictating the decentralisation are promoting Structural Adjustment Programs that undermine the dream of ending poverty and weaken the support systems needed for maintaining and expanding democracy.

***Endangered Development.*** As globalisation has increased, and as Structural Adjustment Programs become part of national governments' operating principles, inequality and poverty have risen. According to the 1999 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report, inequality in societies from advanced capitalist, to the former Soviet Socialist Republics, to the nations of the Third World has increased (UNDP 1999:3, 37-39).<sup>16</sup> In much of the world poverty has also increased. According to the same UNDP report (1999:2-3), in 1999 "More than 80 countries still have per capita incomes lower than they were a decade or more ago" while "55 countries, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) have had declining per capita incomes since 1990."<sup>17</sup>

Declining per capita incomes have been occasional features of the post-World War 2 international development scene. But only in the last few years are we witnessing drops in basic welfare indicators over large population units. The development achievements of recent decades appear to be very fragile. Between 1970 and 1997 13 countries experienced declining life expectancy,<sup>18</sup> the first time to our knowledge that such a trend has occurred in recent decades. Using slightly different years, the World Bank notes this phenomenon in its 1999/2000 Report (1999a:26), explaining the African cases as a result of "slow economic growth" and the spread of AIDS and offering no explanation for the East European and Central Asian data. The possibility of a link to Structural Adjustment is not considered.

Independent researchers have considered the link, however. Following structural adjustment demands a number of African governments reduced food subsidies and support for public services. Between 1980 and 1990 the percentage of underweight African children increased from 26 to 29%. In absolute numbers the increase was from 22 million children to 38 million (Gadner and Halwell 2000:62).<sup>19</sup>

In Zambia, the price of the staple food, cornmeal, increased by 120% during 1985 under an SAP (McMichael 2000:132). The deterioration in conditions is shown in the declining life expectancy we noted above. Zambia's infant mortality rate in 1989 was 76, but by 1997 had risen to 113 (World Bank 1991:159; World Bank 1999a:243). School enrollments declined and per capita incomes fell 10 percent between 1980 and 1986. Cornell University rural sociology Philip McMichael (2000:132) sums it up: "In effect, all the development indicators, including infant mortality, took a downturn under the impact of adjustment policies."

Another African nation with declining life expectancy is Zimbabwe. Under structural adjustment, the government cut food subsidies and food prices tripled between 1991 and 1994. Budgets for health services and education were slashed. Maternal mortality increased, from 150 per 100,000 live births in 1980 to 280 for the period 1990-1997 (World Bank 1991:267; World Bank 1999:243). Many ordinary people understand what is happening. Researcher Michael O'Hearney (1994:92) notes that "The SAP implemented by the government has acquired another name among the majority of Zimbabweans, 'Suffering for African People.' "

Even when the national trends are positive, patterns of inequality may be hiding a spreading decline. The National Nutrition Institute of Mexico estimates that 40 percent of the population suffers from malnutrition, much of it connected to cutbacks in food subsidies and public sector employment. As Mexico's public sector shrank due to IMF demands, health deteriorated. Mexico is witnessing a phenomenon called "epidemiological polarisation"—wide disparities in health among the social classes on indicators such as infant mortality (McMichael 2000:131).<sup>20</sup>

As governments are urged to abandon their social responsibilities, decentralisation is put forth as the alternative. Local communities are urged to take on more responsibilities. Decentralisation can be a way to achieve more democracy, but decentralisation with weak state support produces the hardships just described, as the most vulnerable are made even weaker. Kerala's state-supported decentralisation offers an alternative. In place of handing over responsibilities to local communities in the context of declining public services, Kerala has attempted to create a functional division of responsibilities among state and local levels. Event 14 of the People's Campaign (see table 1), the division of plan priorities among different levels, has worked best so far in the areas of housing and public health. We shall pursue the distinction with international trends in those two areas in more detail.

***Housing and Homelessness.*** Article 25 of the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights declares that "everyone has right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his [sic] family including... housing and medical care...." (United Nations 1993:8). Contrary to the UN Declaration, housing has not become a right and homelessness is increasing even though the world economy grew in the late 1990s. The United Nations Center for Human Settlements estimates that during the 1980's about 40 million people throughout the world were homeless. By 1996 the numbers of homeless had more than doubled to 100 million. In Russia, where the socialist government had subsidised housing, a virtually unregulated capitalist system has been accompanied by a rise in homelessness (T. Wright 2000:29).

In the United States the growth in homelessness results from increases in inequality. In a market economy privately financed housing goes to those who can pay the most. Inequality in the USA has grown since 1973 and with it the number of people who experience homelessness for some period of time (T. Wright 2000:28). From 1980 to 1992, the United States experienced a first-world equivalent of Structural Adjustment when the Reagan and Bush administrations sharply reduced spending on all social programs including housing (Sweeney 1993:81-83). Estimates of homelessness in the United States for any given day range from 600,000 to 750,000 with about 2 million suffering homelessness during a given year.<sup>21</sup>

In Kerala, local communities are directly tackling the housing problem as part of the People's Campaign. As we noted in Campaign Event 8, the first two years of the Campaign saw 98,494 houses constructed, equivalent to about 100 houses in each panchayat. This achievement results from the decision of the local bodies within the context of the Campaign to devote 14.5% of service sector funds to that purpose, with over 30% going for housing in the SC/ST parts of the local plans. If a similar rate is maintained over the 5 years of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plan, over 10% of Kerala households would receive new homes.<sup>22</sup> The People's Campaign appears to have created an effective targeting mechanism and districts are being realistic to take on the total shelter goal.

***Sanitation and Drinking Water.*** Overall, health investment doubled from 2.37% in the 8<sup>th</sup> Plan to 5.05% in the first year of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plan. This resulted largely from the choices made by the local bodies as part of the Campaign (Ekbal 1998:6). But the most dramatic achievements have come in providing access to clean water and sanitation. Between 1990 and 1997 throughout the world an additional 300 million people found themselves without adequate sanitary facilities. The total number was close to 3 billion. In India, 81% of the population officially has access to clean water but only 29% has access to clean toilet facilities (Crossette 1997).<sup>23</sup> Clean water is a problem in much of the Third World. As governments cut back on investment in safe water supplies, the poor who can least afford it have to buy water, often of low quality (Crossette 1999).<sup>24</sup> Under Event 8, we noted that the People's Campaign built 240,307 sanitary latrines in the first two years. This would mean about 5.8% of rural Kerala households, an astonishing achievement. If the rate is maintained over the entire 9<sup>th</sup> Plan, nearly 14.5% of rural households would receive such latrines. The rural areas will probably require an increase in even this rate if Kerala is to achieve 100% latrine coverage by 2003.<sup>25</sup> The importance of sanitary latrines was demonstrated in the Thrikunnapuzha Panchayat experiment that preceded the People's Campaign. With funding from the Dutch government and an 18% beneficiary co-pay of Rs 500, 2,000 latrines were installed, reducing by 90% the number of latrines opening onto canals. After installation of the latrines in 1995, a gastroenteritis outbreak in nearby panchayats led to 33 deaths and 1,000 hospitalisations. In Thrikunnapuzha not a single case was reported.<sup>26</sup>

Kerala's 9<sup>th</sup> Plan drinking water projects emphasise the creation of small-scale, piped water societies involving from 10 to a few hundred households. With minor startup costs from plan funds, these societies can quickly become self-financing. In Olavanna Panchayat, an experiment to establish such societies resulted in bringing safe drinking water to 1,500 of the 7,000 households that faced shortages at an average cost up to 90% lower than with a large-scale government public works approach. With some districts projecting total safe water coverage within a particular time frame, mechanisms will have to be devised to monitor the degree of coverage and to identify remaining unprotected areas. The data-gathering efforts used in drafting the initial Panchayat Development Reports may provide a basis for this monitoring.

***Equality or Polarisation?*** Kerala shows that democratic decentralisation strongly buttressed by state support can be an effective strategy for reaching progressive goals of reducing inequality in living standards. The financial support given by the 9th plan is an essential component of this alternative decentralisation approach. The plan, however, also shows how government can assist in the growth of a community's human capital, which can be defined as the knowledge, skills and abilities that can be used to improve everyone's lives.

Kerala's population has human capital in the form of high levels of literacy. Knowing how to read and write, however, does not by itself equip people for preparing reports, conducting transect walks, and doing cost-benefit analyses. When experts share their knowledge, the stock of human capital is increased.

***Democracy as End and Means.*** Earlier we mentioned the UN Declaration of Human Rights. In its Initial Draft Text of a World Charter of Local Self-Government UNCHS recognizes that "article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights [states] that the will of the people is the basis of the authority of government at all levels" (UNCHS

1998:7). Perhaps what is happening in Kerala will be presented as an important model at the Special Session mentioned earlier.

For the advanced capitalist countries Kerala is a reminder of the value of democracy not as an ideal to be spoken about at patriotic celebrations but as a means to unleash the creative abilities of ordinary people. Kerala shows that government can be major factor in assisting communities as they search for ways to improve the quality of life, protect resources, and engage all sectors in the decision making process.

During the recent protests against the WTO, World Bank and IMF in Seattle and Washington, activists marched in the streets, chanting "this is what democracy sounds like." The sound of the people was a graphic image, but by itself it lacked much content. Whenever we heard that slogan, we thought of another sound of democracy, of people speaking in Malayalam at the grama sabhas, development seminars, task forces, and training meetings all over Kerala. Their actions give us a concrete representation of what democracy can look and sound like, especially when the people's elected representatives join them to make democracy work.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, information is derived from Campaign documents and statistical files made available by the State Planning Board or by individual panchayats. Some of the information is taken from the book to be issued at the Conference: Thomas Isaac, T. M. 2000. *Local democracy and local development: the Kerala people's campaign for decentralised planning*. Delhi: Leftword Books. Detailed analysis of the topics here summarised can be found in the book.

<sup>2</sup> Grama or rural panchayat or urban municipal ward, block groups of rural panchayats, and districts grouping together the blocks. (The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian National Constitution that created the legal basis for decentralisation paradoxically prevent the rural and urban bodies from developing unified district plans.

<sup>3</sup> Estimates are extrapolations of data from the reporting panchayats. In grama sabha 1, 979 grama panchayats reported of a total of 990. We multiplied the sum of attendees by the total rural population, then divided by the total population of the reporting panchayats. We then multiplied the estimated rural attendance by the all-Kerala population of 29,011,237 and divided by the total rural population to get the overall estimate. For grama sabha 2, there were 712 reporting panchayats. For grama sabha 3, 901 panchayats have reported so far. All total population figures are from the 1991 Census, so the estimated attendance might be slightly inflated. Also, urban attendance may have been lower, which would also result in our estimates being a little high.

<sup>4</sup> A Kerala Model quality of life indicators comparison with India, the USA, and low-income countries has appeared in several of our publications. The most recent figures, for the late 1990s, are in our contribution to Parayil 2000, to be published about the time of this conference.

<sup>5</sup> See Franke and Chasin 1994:22-27 for our analysis of other factors in the origin of the Kerala Model.

<sup>6</sup> Franke 1996 gives the details of our findings and the methods by which the data were gathered and tabulated.

<sup>7</sup> For more details and contrasting views on the NDI, see Franke and Chasin 1994:xiv-xvii, Thomas Isaac, Franke, and Parameswaran 1997, and Tornquist 1995.

<sup>8</sup> For further details and additional references on the NDI, see Thomas Isaac, Franke, and Parameswaran 1997.

<sup>9</sup> By January 2000 over 214 panchayats had carried out at least partial mapping.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Isaac *et al* 1995. For additional details from our visits, see Franke and Chasin 1997:3065-66.

<sup>11</sup> For details, see Thomas Isaac, Franke, and Raghavan 1998.



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<sup>12</sup> KDB illustrates the need for a more comprehensive definition of civil society. KDB makes a profit, and it has part government ownership, but any reasonable definition of civil society ought to include it.

<sup>13</sup> We realise that the Structural Adjustment Programs involve more than reducing the role of the public sector, but that is the aspect most relevant to this discussion.

<sup>14</sup> An overview of the most recent thinking appears in Cohen and Peterson 1999.

<sup>15</sup> For a useful discussion of this see Darnton 1994

<sup>16</sup> For discussions of the negative consequences of inequality see E. Wright 2000:144-145 and Bello 1994:52-55

<sup>17</sup> Recent data suggest that India's mini-SAP of the early 1990s may be producing increased rural poverty despite overall economic growth (Ghosh 2000:109-10). A general critique of Indian SAP policies can be found in Patnaik and Chandrasekhar 1998.

<sup>18</sup> UNDP 1999:168-71. We identified the countries by examining the table. They are Armenia, Belarus, Burundi, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malawi, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Uganda, Ukraine, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

<sup>19</sup> When the cost of food rose, people rioted in Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Ghana, and Tanzania (McMichael 2000:132).

<sup>20</sup> NSS data seem to indicate a decline in calorie intake in India from the 1970s to the 1990s, with Kerala among only 6 states experiencing improvements. Despite an overall intake among the lowest of Indian states Kerala also has the lowest percent of severely malnourished children in the age group 0-4 years, a paradox probably explained by the better access to health care, safe water, and sanitation. See Swaminathan and Ramachandran 1999 for the calorie data and for the paradox and its explanation Franke and Chasin 1994:v, 32-36 and Franke 1993:207-9

<sup>21</sup> The lower figure is from the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development of the United States government at <http://www.hud.gov:80/dectorem/homeless.html>. The higher figure is from the National Alliance To End Homelessness at <http://www.nach.org/back/factus.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Grama panchayats in Kerala average 25,199 persons. Taking 6 as an average household size, we get 4,200 households per panchayat. The 100 houses constructed would thus represent 2.3% of the total and over 5 years would come to 11.5%.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Crossette, UNICEF Tells How Half the World Lacks Even Basic Sanitation. *The New York Times*, 23 July, 1997, A9.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Crossette, For the Poor, Water is Dirty Yet Costly, Experts Find. *The New York Times*, 8 August, 1999, page 15.

<sup>25</sup> The latest data we could locate—from the 1987 KSSP sample survey of 10 households each in all 990 rural panchayats in Kerala—are that "two thirds of the households do not have a hygienically safe sanitary facility" (Kannan *et al* 1991:33).

<sup>26</sup> Details and complete references for this case are provided in Thomas Isaac 2000.

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