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Social and Solidarity Economy Experiment*

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Draft paper prepared for the UNRISD Conference

Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy

6–8 May 2013, Geneva, Switzerland

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Taking Solidarity Seriously: Analyzing *Kudumbashree* as a Women's Social and Solidarity Economy Experiment

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This paper analyzes *Kudumbashree*, a unique social initiative in the Indian state of Kerala composed of nearly 4 million women below the poverty line, which is undertaking an important social and solidarity economy experiment. While Kerala has long been the highest ranked Indian state in terms of human development and has received international acclaim for its achievements, it still exhibits significant gender inequality and multiple marginalizations (along the lines of caste, ethnicity, etc.) in the social, political and economic realms. Kudumbashree was initiated by the state government fifteen years ago as a poverty eradication programme. Since that time it has developed into a unique network in which marginalized women work collectively to promote prosperity through planning and implementing programs and projects that address the root causes of their poverty. While Kudumbashree groups participate in a wide range of social, educational, and economic programs, as well as actively engaging in the political realm, in this paper we focus specifically on the social and solidarity economy activities that they have been engaged in. More specifically, we highlight how the creation of strong bonds of solidarity, grounded in democratic decision-making and collective action, have enabled poor women to challenge existing power imbalances and establish innovative organizations.

The Kerala Model – An Incipient Social & Solidarity Economy?

The context out of which Kudumbashree arises is the particular set of policies and practices that were adopted in the state of Kerala between the late 1950s and 1980s and which became known as the “Kerala development model.” The unique features that defined this model were the presence of high social development indicators over an extended period of time without a corresponding level of high economic growth (Chakraborty 2005). Among the social development indicators that are cited are infant mortality rates, life expectancies, female to male ratios and literacy rates, which in all instances far outstripped other Indian states and in some cases approached levels more common in developed nations (Dreze and Sen, 1995). In addition to raising overall social indicators, Kerala has also consistently had among the best performances with regard to narrowing the gap between the general population and marginalized groups, including women, scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST). In order to understand how Kudumbashree emerged out of this model in the late 1990s it is necessary to both qualify its success and to understand the political and economic factors which help to account for this qualified success.

While the basic achievements of the Kerala model are widely cited and uncontroversial, what is less well publicized is the fact that the Kerala model still featured significant differences between historically marginalized groups and the rest of Malayalee society up into the 1990s, and beyond. To account for these on-going differences, it is necessary to briefly examine the origins of the Kerala model that emerged in the wake of the formation of the new state in 1956 out of the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin and the previously British controlled territory of Malabar.

A number of social, political and economic factors are commonly cited as contributing to the emergence of the Kerala model. These include, among others: the presence of a matrilinear tradition in some elements of Malayalam society, especially among the Nair caste (Jeffrey 2004); the promotion of public education by religious organizations (across different religions and denominations) and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin dating back to the 19th century, which resulted high literacy rates among females as well as males (Devika and Thampi 2011; Jeffrey 1987); socio-religious reform movements which emerged out of processes of the commercialization of agriculture (Oommen 2009), and; peasant movements and mobilizations by the communist party that eventually resulted in land reforms (Tharakan 2008).

These various reform measures led to the emergence of relatively vibrant civil society in the new state of Kerala, but one with several distinct features. First, there was still significant social exclusion as it had been the middle sectors that had disproportionally benefitted – both economically and socially – from previous reforms. These sectors were willing to push the new state (and its alternating communist and Congress governments) for further reforms. As the beneficiaries of previous reforms, these middle sectors exhibited some degree of “public mindedness” that allowed them to support the aspirations of more marginalized sectors of society.¹ Second, the marginalized sectors had themselves made some progress under previous reforms and this facilitated their mobilization to fight for the extension of their rights and benefits. Third, even among the middle sectors of society, women, despite enjoying high rates of literacy and education still remained largely shut out of participation in the public sphere, though with notable exceptions (Devika and Thampi 2011; Oommen 2009; Tharakan 2008;).

It was in this context of broad support from both the middle sectors and marginalized groups for social reform and some broad, if not deep level of social solidarity, that the new state was able to promote a variety of social and economic policies that helped to raise social indicators in the state to the top place in the nation. However, while government policies and programs did help marginalized groups, the latter did not benefit as much as the middle sectors of society, especially the male members thereof, who were most heavily involved in formulation of the plans and who were in the best situation to take advantage of them. This was exemplified most notably, perhaps, in the case of land reforms (Tharakan 2008; Matthew 1995).

Another factor in the continuing situation of social exclusion in Kerala, albeit in the presence of generally high levels of social indicators overall, was the failure of the state to induce economic growth. In principle, such growth, especially if effectively targeted, could have played a significant role in helping to improve the situation of marginalized groups. Governments in Kerala, especially communist governments, did promote a number of economic initiatives compatible with the development of a social and solidarity economy (e.g., support for co-operatives, land redistribution programs, etc.). These efforts, however, were embedded in a larger economic system of import substitution industrialization that employed centralized planning to prioritize the development of domestic capacity (usually in the form of large family business houses) in key industrial sectors and which tended to propagate a clientelistic network of patronage that permeated the entire bureaucracy. Under these conditions, and the regular alternation in governments in the state, the promotion of alternative economic development was challenging, to say the least (Isaac and Heller 2003).

To sum up, by the early 1990s in Kerala there was a situation in which there was a well established and widely supported social development model that had produced high

¹ This is a relatively weak form of social solidarity, conforming most closely to Durkheim’s notion of organic solidarity.

social indicators, but one which still exhibited significant levels of social exclusion among historically marginalized groups, with women in these groups being particularly vulnerable. Moreover, women across all social strata continued to be largely excluded from an active role in political decision-making. On the economic front, the government had been unable to induce levels of growth capable of raising marginalized groups out of poverty. It was in this context, that the government of Kerala introduced a decentralized planning process and began to experiment with poverty eradication programs targeted at women.

Kudumbashree: A State-wide Anti-poverty Program

In 1998 the government of Kerala established a state-wide poverty eradication program which it christened Kudumbashree, a name which combined the Malayalam words for family and prosperity. The program drew its inspiration in part from two recent participatory initiatives. On the one hand, pilot projects on nutrition and urban services had been conducted in two districts in Kerala earlier in the decade, in Alappuzha (1993) and Malappuram (1994). These programs, which involved collaboration with international development agencies, employed several features and tools that would be incorporated into Kudumbashree (Pillai 2007; Rajan 2006; Kadiyala 2004). On the other hand, the government was rolling out a decentralized planning process, one designed to address the problems endemic in the previous centralized system by mobilization of masses and allowing local communities greater opportunities to determine their own priorities and to implement their own solutions (Lakshmanan 2006; Issac and Heller 2003). The new anti-poverty program was conceived from its inception as fitting into this planning program.

The ambitious goal that was initially set for Kudumbashree was to eradicate absolute poverty in the state within 10 years. To accomplish this goal, the government determined that the new initiative needed to undertake three broad tasks. First, it had to define what poverty was and identify who the poor were. The authorities recognized that multiple factors could contribute to poverty and were aware that defining poverty in terms of income did not contribute to an understanding of why people were vulnerable to being poor. Drawing upon the pilot projects in Alappuzha and Malappuram, an index was developed of nine social indicators that put families at risk of being poor. On the basis of this index, surveys were undertaken state-wide to identify which families were below the poverty line (BPL), as determined by their exhibiting at least four of the nine risk indicators. The category of “destitute” was added to identify those families that exhibited seven or more of the indicators.²

Second, an organizational structure had to be established. There were three main features of this structure. First, while the name of the new initiative highlighted its goal as the “prosperity of the family”, drawing upon the pilot projects in Alappuzha and Malappuram it was decided that women would be targeted as the primary agents to be organized for promoting prosperity (Siwal 2009). Accordingly, and in line with the pilot projects, BPL women were organized into a three tiered structure composed of neighbour groups (NHGs) of about 15-40 families, area development societies (ADSs) at the ward level, and community development societies (CDSs) at the village (gram) or municipal level. The NHGs provide a

² The indicators have actually changed over time, including allowing for a distinction between rural (e.g., whether they own land), and urban areas (e.g., presence of an illiterate adult), and special criteria for being destitute. Common indicators include inadequate housing, lack of potable water and adequate sanitation, being a member of a scheduled caste/tribe, female-headed households, and the lack of a person with regular employment (Pillai 2007). Various criticisms have been raised about these indicators, including what their purpose is (e.g., indicators of being at risk for being poverty or causes of poverty), whether they should be weighted, whether they are independent, the value of specific indicators, etc. (Oommen 2008)

discursive forum for women as well as serving as the basic unit for planning³ and functioning as trust and credit societies (which fund micro and group enterprises). All of the groups are democratically run, with members from the lower level groups electing representatives to the upper levels. In addition to this social movement side of Kudumbashree, there is also a second, more administrative or bureaucratic side. As the official poverty eradication program of the state, Kudumbashree is also a government agency that has a budget and paid staff and is responsible to the Department of Local Self-Governments. As a government agency, the role of this side of Kudumbashree is to provide support, training and co-ordination for the social movement side. A third feature of Kudumbashree involves its formal integration into the local decentralized planning process. Through their three-tiered social movement structure, Kudumbashree groups participate in a planning process through which they develop and consolidate development plans, as discussed below (Rajan 2006; Kadiyala 2004).

Third, Kudumbashree groups are actively engaged in carrying out the programs that they propose through the local planning process. Through their three-tiered structure, BPL women take on the responsibility for identifying their own needs and developing plans to address these. Micro plans formed in the NHGs may be acted upon directly or they may be woven into mini plans in the ADSs with these, in turn, compiled into larger CDS plans. The latter are incorporated into the local planning process as the “anti-poverty plan” of the village or municipality, with one-third of the total development funds set aside for these plans. With support from the government agency side of Kudumbashree and the local government, these plans are operationalized through the Kudumbashree groups and their members (Oommen 2008; Pillai 2007).

Agency and Solidarity

One of the basic premises of Kudumbashree from the start was that the poor needed to be active agents in their own development. While they differ in their terminology, numerous studies have documented the success that Kudumbashree has had in promoting agency (autonomy, empowerment) among its members (Prakash and Chandrasekar 2012; Oommen 2008; Alkire and Cherkov 2007). More significant than the specific measures of empowerment, for our concerns, is the question of how it has been possible for Kudumbashree to generate agency, especially collective agency, in such a comprehensive fashion – at such significant rates, across so many different areas (knowledge, leadership, etc.), across such a great expanse (state-wide) and among such large numbers (nearly 4 million poor women).

One starting point in attempting to answer these questions is the recognition in recent years that exercising agency is a complex and dynamic process that entails operating in different realms and requires access to a variety of types of resources. Friedmann (1992), for example, has argued that people need access to three basic forms of resources to effectively exercise power or agency: (1) social resources such as defensible life space, surplus time, knowledge and skills, appropriate information, social organization, social networks, etc.; (2) economic resources such as instruments of work and livelihood, financial resources, training and education, etc.; (3) political resources including access to formal democratic mechanisms, civil disobedience, informal mechanisms of protest, media, etc. The different resources complement each other and can be used to exercise agency across different realms in mutually supportive ways.

³ Each NHG elects five volunteers to the following positions; President, Secretary, Infrastructure Volunteer, Community Health Volunteer and Income Activities Generation Volunteer (Siwal 2009)

Arguable, the key to Kudumbashree's success has been its ability to generate and access these types of resources in a *comprehensive* and *systematic* fashion through a dynamic relationship between its movement side and its support structures. With regard to the latter, the state has provided resources in three basic ways, as noted above, namely by promoting a three-tiered structure for the organization of poor women, by establishing a state agency specifically designed to work with the movement side of Kudumbashree and by integrating the movement into the state's decentralized planning process. With respect to social resources, the organizational and support structures have facilitated the creation of safe spaces, a regular supply of information and the formation of extensive social networks through the provision of training, organizational support and access to funds. In terms of political resources, the skills gained through involvement in the group structures can be used by women to take full advantage of the access (mediated by the state) to planning structures, as well as to engage in the formal electoral process, in public protests, lobbying efforts, etc. In the economic realm, support bodies provide training, expert advice and facilitate access to capital (through the decentralized planning process and private sector lending). (Oommen 2008; Pillai 2007)

While the state in Kerala has provided unprecedented resources for the empowerment of women, this support only facilitates agency. The actual exercise of agency required decisions and action on the part of poor women. It has been decisions on the part of poor women to come out of their homes, and to encourage their neighbours to come out of their homes, in order to discuss and act upon their situation that has been essential for empowerment. By coming together in NHGs – often at great personal cost and in opposition to the will of their husbands – women have created safe spaces, gained confidence and have learned to work together to form the organizations that allowed them to effectively utilize resources, sometimes in the face of resistance by local government bodies (Rajan 2006).

Moreover, by engaging in democratic decision-making to assess needs and develop plans aimed at promoting social justice (and not just their own group interests), and by acting collectively to implement these plans, BPL women have generated what is perhaps their greatest resource, strong and extensive bonds of solidarity of a particular type. Grounded as they are in discursive democracy and collective action for social justice, these bonds go beyond kinship relationships and mutual self-interest. They are, arguably, what is most distinctive about Kudumbashree and the basis of their ability to engage in collective agency across the social, political and economic spheres. To understand Kudumbashree, it is necessary to take these bonds of solidarity seriously, that is, to problematize their formation and how they function.⁴ In the next section, we examine specifically how these bonds of solidarity are formed and are drawn upon in the development of some key social and solidarity economy initiatives.

Kudumbashree: An Emerging Social and Solidarity Economy?

Kudumbashree has developed a variety of income and employment schemes in the form of micro and group enterprises.⁵ These range across the primary sectors (small livestock

⁴ The notion of solidarity that we are employing here is grounded in Habermasian critical theory. Unlike the Durkheimian notions of mechanical and organic solidarity (which are based upon shared lifeworld assumptions and promoting shared interests in complex societies), this understanding presupposes a commitment to discursive decision-making. Moreover, it highlights the fact that building bonds of solidarity involves shared practice (in addition to discursive decision-making).

⁵ The majority of micro-enterprises are single proprietors, but some are owned by small groups. They have an investment of between Rs. 5000-250,000 and are supposed to generate a minimum income of Rs. 1500 per member. Formal group enterprises have a minimum of 10 members and higher investment rates (Siwal 2009).

rearing programs, group agriculture), secondary sectors (garment manufacturing, food processing, etc.) and tertiary sectors (information technology, recycling, sustainable tourism, etc.). From the start these initiatives received financing through the thrift and credit associations, while recently the development of distribution channels (local markets, a home shopping network) has been actively promoted. Together, these initiatives form the basis of a complete social and solidarity economy, in which the activities in different sectors are mutually reinforcing. Such an economy, however, is at best only in its initial phase. In the final section, we offer some reflections on the prospects and conditions for its development, especially in relation to the problematic of extending bonds of solidarity. In this section, however, we focus on how solidarity has functioned in the successful development of two of Kudumbashree's largest economic initiatives, one a government employment program and the other involving group agriculture.

The MGNREGS Program

In 2005, the Indian government passed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme Act (MGNREGS), which put in place what has been hailed as the largest and most successful public investment program in India in recent times. The program provides a legal guarantee of 100 days of paid employment at minimum wage rates to adults in rural households who are willing to do unskilled manual work in public work programs.

The NREGS envisages a central role for local decision-making bodies in determining the nature of the work to be and its allocation. In India, there is a three-tier structure of local self-governance in rural India (the Panchayati Raj system). At the base of this system are the Gram Panchayat (village council) and the Gram Sabha (village assembly). Each Gram Panchayat consists of one or more villages, while a *Gram Sabha* is a body constituted by the persons on the electoral roll for a *Gram Panchayat*. It is the *Gram Panchayat* that convenes meetings of the *Gram Sabha* "to disseminate information to the people as well as to ensure that development of the village is done through participation or consent of all households." (GOI 2012: 2-3) Above the village level, there are block panchayats and district panchayats levels in every state.

With respect to the operationalization of the program, the MGNREGS Act states:

Plans and decisions regarding the nature and choice of works to be undertaken in a Fiscal Year along with the order in which each work is to be taken up, site selection, etc. are all to be made in open assemblies of the Gram Sabha (GS) and ratified by the *Gram Panchayat* (GP). Works that are inserted at Block and District levels have to be approved and assigned a priority by the GS before administrative approval can be

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