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*SOCIAL CAPITAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE  
CONSOLIDATION  
OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN RURAL AREAS*

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# **SOCIAL CAPITAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN RURAL AREAS (or, Public Action and Rural Development)**

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## ***An introductory note:***

Neither of the key terms in my title can be treated as an established concept in the social sciences. Both have entered the development lexicon only in the last ten years, and both are still contested amongst social scientists. This is why I have suggested an alternative title for thinking through the issues to which the ideas of ‘social capital’ and of ‘civil society’ refer. These, I take it, are the problems and potentials surrounding participation and local, community organisation in development.

I suggest a formulation which mentions ‘Public Action’ rather ‘Social Capital Construction’ for several reasons. First, though I do think that the term ‘social capital’ has meaning (it refers to resources which are inherent within certain social relationships) it has come to be used in such a way in the development discourse as to be emptied of analytical content in the service, wittingly or not, of conservative, ideological ends. At the very least, it has become a term which is thoroughly confused and confusing. Second, and following from the first point, the ways in which the idea of ‘social capital’ has come to be used often suggest, directly or indirectly, that ‘stocks of social capital’ or, what is often held to be more or less the same thing, a ‘strong/vibrant civil society’, are a condition for effective, functioning democracy and for economic development (or simply for ‘health, wealth, wisdom and happiness’). In my view this is profoundly misleading because it obscures the importance both of state action and of politics, in themselves, and in relation to ‘civil society’. At worst it justifies a view that expects those people who are most marginalised/excluded to ‘pull themselves up by their own bootstraps’ in a way that is extremely convenient for those who stand to benefit most from public expenditure cuts. Third, given that my understanding of what constitutes ‘social capital’ is that it is entirely context dependent, and that all societies have ‘it’, the issue is not one of ‘constructing social capital’, but rather one of establishing contexts in which more people are able to realise the potentials of their ‘social capital’. I find in Dreze and Sen’s idea of ‘public action’ a much more constructive concept, emphasising as it does the interplay of state and of non-state action in the public arena. In this paper I want to consider the conditions which are conducive to the establishment of an interplay which has positive outcomes for democracy and for development.

This is why I would like also, if not to jettison the second part of the title, at least to subject it to careful scrutiny. ‘Civil society’, too, is a term which has come to be used in very particular ways in the development discourse. It is usually taken to mean the sphere of voluntary social association which is outside both the state and the level of the family and kinship groups (though some do include the latter in ‘civil society’). It

is commonly distinguished, from 'political society', and thought to be on the whole preferable to politics. A 'robust civil society' is taken to be an important element of 'good governance', and it seems generally to be assumed that both will be supportive of or complementary to liberal economic policies. Sometimes it is treated as meaning more or less the same thing as 'social capital' – as Mike Edwards, sometime Senior Civil Society Adviser in the World Bank, has told us is often the way in that most august of development organisations. But whereas it has come to be recognised even by its protagonists that 'social capital' has a 'dark side' – in other words that the resources that people have by virtue of their social relationships are not necessarily used in the interests of society as a whole – that possibility hardly seems to have been entertained in regard to civil society. That civil society exists in a field of power – or that there are differences of power within civil society – hardly seems to cross the minds of those who wish to see the space of civil society expanded, and that of the state (and of the market, maybe) reduced.

I think that both 'social capital' and 'civil society' have proven so attractive in the discourse of development because they seem to hold out the prospects of democracy without the inconveniences of contestational politics and of the conflicts of ideas and interests which are an essential part of democracy. The approach which I shall take is one which seeks to bring both the state and political agency back in. I proceed by first expanding upon the critique of the idea of 'social capital', because this brings out the significance of political contexts; and then by examining evidence and argument which really shows how 'public action' works across 'the public-private' divide. Finally I take the case of the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in the Indian state of Kerala since 1996 as a concrete instance of the more general and abstract arguments advanced earlier in the paper.

### **'Down With Social Capital!' 'Up with politics!'**

What a silly slogan this may seem. How can one possibly be 'against' social capital, if it means, in the words of the great populariser of the idea, Robert Putnam, 'networks, norms and trust that facilitate collective action'. And indeed my complaint is rather with the uses to which the term has been put than with the idea itself. In the hands of the two writers who more than any others have theorised social capital, Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, it is a useful but modest concept. Bourdieu speaks of social capital as meaning 'connections' and he refers to more or less durable social relationships which are implicated in access to resources and hence, in the reproduction of class differentiation. According to this conception of it, social capital is certainly not a characteristic of 'society' as a whole. No more is it in the work of James Coleman, even though his whole orientation is very different from Bourdieu's. For him social capital refers to resources (of information and insurance) which arise from relationships between people, which are of value to them. There may be a public good aspect but social capital, in this conceptualisation, is not entirely fungible, and it is not at all evident that the social capital enjoyed by different groups of people can simply be added up into a 'total score' for a society as a whole.

In Putnam's celebrated analysis of the performance of regional governments in Italy, however, it is suggested that whole *societies* may be differentiated in terms of the extent of their social capital. He aimed to demonstrate that the differences both in

government performance and in levels of economic development between north central Italy and the Italian South can best be explained as being the outcomes of variations in 'civic engagement', measured by political participation, newspaper readership and the density of horizontal, voluntary associations (like football clubs, choirs and bird-watching societies). Later, 'civic engagement' is more or less equated in his work with 'social capital' which is also seen as deriving particularly from horizontal, voluntary associations. Hence the tendencies by researchers and policy-makers subsequently to equate social capital with an idea of civil society as being constituted by voluntary associations in the space between family and state; and thus to associate social capital in particular with voluntary associations. These ideas are deeply flawed logically. The flaws derive from the basic problem that while Putnam's argument that interpersonal trust is built up through membership in voluntary associations may be sound enough, he offers no explanation as to how and why such interpersonal trust is translated into generalized societal trust. Clearly it is possible to conceive of circumstances – and to find them historically – where there are groups or associations in a society within each of which there is a high level of trust, and in that sense, of social capital, but where the groups are actually very hostile to each other. Does such a society, then, have a high level of social capital? The answer to this question is surely that it is not a meaningful concept. The trust/social capital that is built up in small groups in which people interact face to face and build up a lot of knowledge of each other and develop norms of reciprocity is not simply aggregated together to constitute generalized trust within the society as a whole..

'Civility' or 'civicness' (which is how Putnam also talks about 'civic engagement') actually implies notions of impartiality of treatment and of the equality of individuals (as citizens) before the law. The concept of 'civil society', too (and there are, of course, a number of different conceptualisations of the idea) implies the existence of laws and of less formal codes for conduct (such as ideas of 'professional ethics'). It is when people generally believe in the legitimacy of these institutions and are reasonably confident that the values and norms that inhere within them will motivate those who are concerned in implementing them that civicness/civil society flourishes, and there is a fair degree of generalised societal trust (as Putnam actually states, ironically enough, in his discussion of the history of civic organisation in Italy). But it is not at all clear logically, nor demonstrable empirically, that these conditions *arise* from the existence of horizontal, voluntary associations. The existence of civil society, therefore, and of generalised trust in a society, presuppose an institutional framework which is put into place through the agency of a state.

If Putnam's arguments about civic engagement = social capital = voluntary associations are flawed logically, historians of Italy have shown (i) that there are serious errors in his historiography, and (ii) that at least as convincing a set of propositions about the social phenomena that Putnam describes show the centrality of the state and of political processes. The backwardness of the Italian South is shown as being not the outcome of many centuries of a culturally determined lack of trust/social capital, but rather the result of the processes of state-building in Italy in the nineteenth century. And the existence of high levels of 'civic engagement' in north central Italy both at the end of nineteenth century and towards the end of the twentieth can very well be explained as being the outcomes (and not the causes) of the development of progressive political parties and politics in this region. Putnam notes an association between effective government and those areas where the Italian Communist Party has

won strong support; but he does not acknowledge that part of the tactics of the PCI was exactly to encourage those activities which are recognised in the measure of 'civic engagement'/social capital.

The argument which has been derived from Putnam's work, therefore, to the effect that the existence of a 'vibrant civil society' or of 'abundant stocks of social capital' – both being equated with 'lots of voluntary associations' – is a condition for functioning democracy and/or 'good governance', seems both logically and historically doubtful. Critics of his more recent American work (in articles and a big book about 'Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of community in America') have reached exactly the same conclusion. One of them (Theda Skocpol, also from Harvard) finds that 'US civic associations were encouraged by the American Revolution, the Civil War, the New Deal, and World Wars I and II; and until recently they were fostered by the institutional patterns of US federalism, legislatures, competitive elections, and locally rooted political parties' Her key point – grounded in her own substantive historical analysis of 'How Americans Became Civic' - is that Putnam is wrong to suppose, as he often seems to, 'that social capital is something that arises or declines in a realm apart from politics and government'.

I believe that I have said quite enough to show that the idea of social capital deriving from Putnam's work- which is the one that has been so influential - is distinctly confused, and even more that the 'big idea' which has been associated with it, that voluntary associations are the 'missing link' in development, is misleading. But it is not just confused and misleading, it is also rather a pernicious idea. It is interesting to find that Putnam's views of social capital in America have been picked up so enthusiastically by conservatives (though he describes himself as a 'progressive'). As Theda Skocpol has put it, it would be deeply ironic if the same middle class and professional people who very largely built up locally-rooted associations, but who have latterly tended to withdraw from them (so it is they who are mainly responsible for 'the decline of civic America' since the 1960s, in Putnam's analysis) 'were now to turn around and successfully argue that the less privileged Americans they left behind are the ones who must repair the nation's social connectedness, by pulling themselves together from below without much help from government or their privileged fellow citizens. This, I fear, is what is happening'. The same fear arises in the context of international development. Part of the enthusiasm for 'constructing social capital' and 'building civil society' is that they are consistent with the neo-liberal agenda of reducing the role of the state, partly so as to make possible large cuts in public expenditure. A good deal of the policy literature on social capital reflects a similar idea of 'people pulling themselves together from below without much help from government or their privileged fellow citizens'. How very convenient this is for those who benefit from cuts in social expenditure. 'Down with social capital', therefore.

These critical reflections upon the popular conception of social capital derived from Putnam also help to justify my other slogan of 'Up with politics'. Civil society flourishes, and generalised trust arises, in a framework of institutions which are established by governments - and are, consequently, the subject of political contestation. It is also a misconception to attempt to distinguish 'civil society' from 'political society' (just as the ontological distinctness of 'state' and 'society' disappears on close empirical scrutiny). We have seen that it is likely that certain styles of politics, and particular political ideologies are more conducive to 'civic

engagement' than are others. It is one of the more curious aspects of Putnam's view of social capital that he should be so unwilling to distinguish between associations like choirs and football clubs, and those like church groups, or trade unions or other mass organisations, or political parties, which have definite ideologies and public purposes.

This view of social capital also abstracts it from context, and particularly from the context of power relations within society. Is it not perfectly possible – to give an example to make the point - that poor people may have 'large stocks' of social capital in the sense that there are dense social networks amongst them, and high levels of reciprocity and of trust, but that they are still denied access to, or cannot secure access to material resources? Their 'social capital' really isn't 'worth' as much as that associated with the 'durable social relationships' obtaining between, say, the members of an elite club. (This is why Bourdieu suggests the idea of social capital in the context of an analysis of class differentiation) The de-contextualised concept of social capital which has become so popular as a development panacea obscures such issues of power, and therefore of politics.

The alternative approach which I advocate is centred – quite contrary to what is implied in the current usage of the idea of social capital by development organisations - on political agency.

### **Why the idea of participatory, community development may be misleading**

The ideas of social capital and of civil society are important themes in a wider discourse having to do with participation (and hence, supposedly, with 'empowerment') in development, and also with decentralisation of governmental authority (beyond deconcentration of administration) This is a discourse which holds that development which is built up 'from the grassroots' will be both informed by and be responsive to people's ideas, needs and interests. Decentralisation is thought to be, if not a condition for such development, certainly a powerful facilitator of it, and arguments in favour of decentralisation overlap with those in support of participation. James Manor has argued from his comparative analysis of the available evidence that in relation to rural development decentralisation has 'lots of promise' in regard to (amongst others):

- \*promoting greater participation and associational activity (though not necessarily, he notes, amongst poorer, low status groups of people)
- \*enhancing the responsiveness of government institutions
- \*increasing the flow of information between government and people
- \*enhancing transparency
- \*promoting greater accountability
- \*making development plans and projects more sustainable

There is of course much in all of this, and it arises in part in response to the perception of the practical and moral failures of top-down development, imposed by external agencies (whether well-meaning, or not). It is a discourse which looks to action by and in communities (usually taken to refer to neighbourhoods). Hence, at least in part, the enthusiasm for the idea of social capital understood as meaning essentially 'horizontal voluntary associations' - because they should help to build norms and

values that will be conducive to the solution of problems of collective action. And given the near equation of meaning between 'social capital' and 'civil society' what is held (as for example in the World Bank paper which outlines the argument that social capital constitutes the 'missing link' in development) is that the development of local organisations means strengthening or consolidating civil society, and that this will have all sorts of positive developmental outcomes because it should make both for participation and greater responsiveness on the part of government agencies (etc, as per Manor's list).

It is well to be aware of the limitations of some of these ideas. First, there is by now substantial empirical evidence and theoretical reasoning which warns us that communities/neighbourhoods are often *not* the sites of reciprocity, mutuality and of collective action, because they are divided by differences of class and identity. There is of course little that is really 'new' in the present day development discourse and in one of its earlier avatars, as 'community development' (one of the pillars of rural development in India, for example, in the 1950s) participatory development is known often to have failed altogether either because programmes were taken over and used for their benefit by local power holders, or because people simply would not contribute time and effort to activities that would benefit mainly the wealthier and more powerful people. (Of course it also possible that identity/class differentiation facilitates certain types of collective action – as in those Andhra Pradesh villages in which Robert Wade found local resource users' associations. These associations were in part projections of the dominance of one particular caste community). Second, and otherwise, it may well be the case that in some neighbourhoods/communities there is a lot of mutuality and reciprocity, but – as I have said – that this resource, on its own, does not lead to very much. Third, 'strong' community ties, not uncommonly, constrain enterprise and initiative, and may be associated with social exclusivism.

Both theoretical consideration and an increasing volume of empirical evidence suggest that for the potentials in local organisation (or 'horizontal voluntary association') and community action to be realised – or in other words, in order to realise the potentials in local social capital - other actors have to be involved as well. This is the point which the World Bank's 'social capitalists' have now sought to recognise when they argue that for positive developmental outcomes there is a need both for 'bonding capital' (relating to the network of relationships within a group of people), and for 'bridging capital' (or in other words strong external connections, as well).

A series of comparative studies (in six countries of Asia and Latin America, plus Hungary) recently undertaken by Peter Evans and his associates show that the capacity for collective action (in pursuit of sustainable livelihoods, or 'livability') in a community of people is not (as Putnam's Italian work suggested) a matter of historical endowment, but can be constructed, even in unlikely communities. One condition for the construction of this capacity is that the achievement of some common end should appear to be a feasible possibility, but much also depends on the context of a community: the studies 'caution us against overemphasising the degree to which the capacity for collective action is a historical endowment (but) they also underline inescapable differences across communities depending on the social and the human resources that that they can command'. While the energy for change lies within the community it has to be complemented 'by broader sets of ideas and

organisation'. External linkages, which may operate through NGOs, social movement organisations, political parties, or informal connections through individuals with bases outside the community, 'play an essential role in enabling communities to become effective agents of livability. *Romantic visions in which individual communities can somehow resolve problems of livelihood and sustainability on their own are politically misguided and a political disservice*'. Evans notes that the role of political parties is 'both more ubiquitous and much more complex' than those of the other agents which may be involved. He concludes that: 'Suggesting that parties are the solution to communities' needs for external linkages would be foolish. Control, clientelism and co-optation and the quest for partisan advantage play much too large a role in the repertoires of even progressive parties. Nonetheless, it would be equally foolish for activists and community leaders to ignore the possibilities that party structures afford and the way that oppositional parties can open up the larger political environment for new discourses and new forms of participation'. And to underline this point about the centrality of political action Evans and his co-researchers also find that 'allies within the state are crucial resources for communities and other social groups' working towards sustainable livelihoods. (especially when communities mobilise against powerful private interests). This is what the idea of 'state-society synergy' means: 'It is shorthand for the myriad concrete relationships of mutual support that connect communities, NGOs and social movements with individuals and organisations inside the state who put a priority on livelihood and sustainability', though this should not be taken to imply that conflict is absent from the relations of communities and state agencies. Quite to the contrary, paradoxically, 'conflict is likely to be first and foremost with agencies that are supposed to be part of the solution'.

In sum, Evans and Co show that the realisation of the potentials in the energy of local communities depends upon their relationships with a number of other agents, amongst which political and state actors are the key players. Tony Bebbington's detailed studies of rural development in the Andes reach the same conclusion. Where he finds 'islands of sustainability' in the Andes he identifies several common factors. One is the production of high-value commodities for middle class and elite markets. Another critical factor is 'the existence of local organisations, and of external actors who have networks of contacts with non-local institutions'. And he notes that an important aspect of the role of 'indigenous (local) organisations' in this case is that they have challenged, negotiated and influenced 'dominant institutions that marginalize the rural poor', initially by invoking 'claims for rights (including land rights) against the hacienda, the church and the state'. In other words, they have played a very important political role. Elsewhere Bebbington has argued that 'Putnam's – and other – discussions of social capital often understate the "rawer" questions of political economy and violence. Indeed, one of the most critical "resources" that people need to access is the legalisation and continuing recognition by government, military and society of rights of organisation and association. Without these, struggles for access are quite likely to unsuccessful'.

Judith Tandler has persuasively laid out a very comparable set of arguments with regard to decentralisation. The crucial point about the synergy between local (government and 'civil society') and central (state) factors is one that is amplified in her studies of government in the state of Ceara in northeast Brazil which, from being one of the states with the poorest records of all in relation to human development



criteria, was turned around in a remarkably short space of time under the aegis of two young reformist governors (who 'in the process of competition saw pro-poor policies as a way of achieving popularity'). Tendler's focus is on what made for the greatly improved performance of government that was essential for these achievements, and she comments incisively on 'the ironic paradox of decentralisation' in this context (which is that, in the words of a former Colombian minister, 'it demands more centralisation and more sophisticated political skills at the national level').

What has been involved in the Ceara story has been a transformation – not universally, or without resistance – in the performance of government employees. Where programmes have been made to work much more effectively than before – in the health sector, in agriculture, and in drought relief – it has been very substantially because of changes in work organisation and in the commitment of government workers. In many ways their patterns of work have come to resemble those which are associated with the most successful private-sector enterprises: flexible, involving team-work, and a client-centred, problem solving approach (rather than the delivery of centrally determined 'products'). These in turn have been made possible through the creation by the state of an imagery of 'calling' around public service, by means of the publicity which has been given to public employees and the public celebration of their achievements (and the protection of dedicated and capable workers from others who have remained entrenched in the old rent-seeking ways). This same publicity has become, also, an instrument for the monitoring of the performance of the workers (it was 'the flip side of the same messages that made these workers feel recognised and honoured by citizens'). It has shown the public what should be expected of public employees, and publicity has been given, too, to the importance of complaints from members of the public about failures of performance.

Has all this happened because of 'decentralisation and participation', which is expected to improve government performance mainly because of the dynamic relationship between civil society and local government? This assumption has been strongly buttressed in the development literature because of the conclusions of Putnam's study of the performance of local government in Italy, which suggest - as I noted earlier - that good performance is conditioned particularly by the existence of a robust civil society with abundant resources of 'social capital'. 'Civil society' works a certain 'magic' – improving government performance through higher levels of accountability – and it works best at the local level. So this is why decentralisation is held to be such a 'good thing'.

Tendler's analysis falsifies these propositions, and she finds that the improved performance of government workers has rather involved a three-way dynamic between local government, civil society and an active central (that is, here, state) government. Most strikingly, central government actually took some powers *away* from municipal governments in order, paradoxically, to strengthen local government. The success of the health sector programme, for example, depended in part upon the fact that the central government took away powers of making appointments of local health workers from mayors, and forbade them from distributing political campaign leaflets - so that they were no longer the more or less dependent clients of local power-holders. Similarly the central government took away the decision making powers of mayors in drought relief programmes. And though in the later 1980s the state government was required to devolve funds for health and education programmes

to municipal governments, which had increased responsibilities in these areas, in practice it set up a system of sanctions and incentives, denying funds to local authorities which would not run programmes according to the principles which had been established, and bringing pressure to bear upon them by publicising the kinds of services which should now be made available.

It certainly was the case in Ceara that institutions in civil society played an important role in the improvement of governmental performance. But their impact on central government was at least as important as at the local level. The professional association of health workers, notably, exercised a very strong influence on the government's health policies. Further, some of the significant institutions of civil society were established at the instance of local government; and no matter what the intentions behind all the state's publicity and information campaigns 'they nevertheless had awareness-raising impacts on the public that were similar to those of the more 'purely' motivated messages of this nature from independent advocacy NGOs ... In certain ways, ironically, this 'advocacy' by government on behalf of citizens was better than that of NGOs, in that it gave detailed instructions to the public on exactly what government workers or contractors should and should not be doing'.

So in important ways central government intervened, in a sense to support and protect citizens against local government, in the context of these three-way relationships, and – says Tendler – there is a 'magic that was worked by distrust between central and local governments'. Her point of course, is not to advocate that central government should return to its old centralised ways, but to show that the relations between central and local government, and civil society, in cases of 'good government' are actually much more complex than the simple 'decentralisation model/logic' proposes. Richard Crook and Alan Sverrisson have reached comparable conclusions in their recent review of evidence concerning experiments with decentralisation in a number of countries. Where it can be shown that decentralisation has been effective both in deepening democracy and in promoting poverty alleviating development (notably in the Indian state of West Bengal) it is in circumstances in which the interests of poorer people are supported from outside: 'We would emphasise the over-riding significance of the politics of local-central relations ... as the major determinant of the differences between the successful and unsuccessful cases ... Accountability and responsiveness to the poor is still most likely to emerge locally where representation of their interests can be supported externally, in the context of a conflict between local and central forces with different power bases'.

*Common threads in the evidence and argument which I have reviewed here are these:*

*\*while all societies have the sorts of resources which have been labelled as 'stocks of social capital' the implications and, in a sense, the 'value' of these resources is entirely contextually dependent*

*\*local organisation or community action on their own are liable to be ineffectual, or to be vehicles for the interests of more powerful people, in the absence of significant external linkages, especially (not exclusively) through political organisations*

*\*civil society is established in relation to institutions which are defined by the state*

*\*arguments*

- (i) *which call for 'participation'/'community action'/'action in civil society' in isolation from or as an alternative to state action; or*
- (ii) *which more or less equate these with 'decentralisation', and take that to mean the withdrawal of the state at the centre; or*
- (iii) *which suggest that 'stocks of social capital'/'vibrant civil society' are conditions for the establishment of effective democracy and 'good government',*

*are misleading – and it is quite misleading to suggest that 'social capital', understood a la Putnam, to mean 'local voluntary association', is the key condition for 'health, wealth, wisdom and happiness' (i.e 'development') in a population*

*\*the realisation of the potentials of participative, community-level action, depends upon the establishment of a political context which secures the rights of less advantaged or less 'resource-full' people, often against local power-holders; and which creates conditions for the existence of deliberative democracy*

*\*the successful realisation of the potentials of participative, community-level action also involves networks amongst actors at different levels and in different sites, including especially local organisations, political parties and state agencies, as well, perhaps, as NGOs and social movement organisations*

In the concluding section of this paper I give a short account of an instance of the kind of process which is involved (in the 'realisation of the potentials of participative, community-level action').

### **Public action and political process: the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala**

In 1996 the Communist Party of India (Marxist)- led Left Democratic Front government in Kerala launched the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning. It is a notable example of the development of public action, in a political context, involving interplay between state and local, 'popular' agency. What is perhaps particularly striking about it is the use of planning as a means of social mobilisation. The context for the launching of the People's Campaign was in the recognition within the CPI(M) in Kerala by the early 1990s that the state's economic stagnation seriously threatened its achievements in redistribution and social welfare (which had been founded, of course, on India's most successful agrarian reform). As the late E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the outstanding leader of the Kerala party wrote in 1994: 'I feel that one big question we face is whether the organized strength and political consciousness of our people can be used to increase production and productivity. I want to answer in the affirmative. But there is a precondition: the government and the ruling classes must change their attitude to the organizations of the people and their demands ... I must emphasise the importance of democratic decentralization in this context'. In order to bring about increased production and productivity, it was now felt,

democratic decentralization of planning is required, for this 'implies that people can be involved not only in making demands but in taking decisions on how to improve their lives and their communities' - and so should make for better informed, more responsive and more efficient programmes. A number of small experiments in Kerala by this time had begun to show what might be achieved.

The clue to the People's Campaign is perhaps given above all in this statement: 'In a sense, the state government launched a movement to force its own hand radically to restructure the mode of governance'<sup>1</sup>. The movement was grounded above all on the decision to devolve substantial funds – 35-40 per cent of plan expenditure – to local government institutions, without waiting, as has been the conventional wisdom hitherto, for the gradual building up of local administrative capacity. In addition to this bold reversal of orthodoxy, the other keystone in the arch (if arches may be allowed to have two) has been *the use of planning as an instrument of social mobilization*. Mass participation and transparency in the local planning process have drawn in large numbers of people (even if, still, a minority of the population). The achievements of decentralized planning – which remain modest, its architect concedes, though they are still concrete – have been made against the initial apathy, if not indeed the active hostility of government officials, and the opposition or at best only lukewarm support of members of the state legislative assembly, even those from the ruling party, who have felt slighted at the way in which they have been side-lined. The Campaign was successful in mobilizing very large numbers of people, many of them – perhaps even a majority – from outside the ruling party, and developed a momentum which ensured that the elected representatives who are ultimately responsible under the law for deciding upon local spending priorities, acted in accordance with popular wishes as they were expressed in plan and project proposals. But this mass mobilization involved both the very active intervention of the state government in crucial ways, notably in planning and implementing the huge effort of training that was involved, and the engagement of organisations in civil society such as the KSSP (the 'People's Science Movement'), with its 40,000 volunteers all over the state. Thus the Kerala programme exemplifies the curious paradox of effective decentralization, which is that it may actually require the government at the centre to play a more active role in certain crucial respects.

The People's Campaign unfolded in six phases, beginning with a special programme in September-October 1996 for galvanizing the village councils, the *gram sabhas*. These institutions, which are supposed to form the basis of deliberative democracy in India, have not generally been at all effective. Unsurprisingly, people have been apathetic about them, and they have been poorly attended and dominated by the 'usual suspects' - older men from the higher castes and classes. The People's Campaign began therefore with a drive to heighten awareness and understanding of the role of the *grama sabhas*. Their meetings were also carefully planned (the 'centre' intervening here, crucially), so that they were broken up into smaller groups quite quickly, to discuss local needs using semi-structured questionnaires derived partly from participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques, with the facilitation of specially trained resource persons. Though it is clear from what happened subsequently that the *grama sabhas* did develop considerable energy, even so across the state as a

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation comes from the book written about the People's Campaign by its architect, Thomas Isaac.

whole an average of only 11.4 per cent of voting age persons attended, more in the north of the state and less in the centre and the south. This disparity between regions has evidently persisted.

The second phase involved the preparation of Panchayat Development Reports for discussion at Development Seminars at which a majority of the delegates were elected by the *grama sabhas*. Again training of resource persons was involved, and they led such participatory exercises as Panchayat Level Resource Mapping (using PRA methods), required for the analysis of local opportunities and constraints. The Development Seminars culminated in the election of 'Task Forces' entrusted with the job of developing seminar proposals into actual projects. This occupied the third phase of the Campaign, which was the most difficult, partly because it brought into focus uneasy relationships with the bureaucracy. Ultimately, however, the elected panchayat representatives were able to formulate plans (this was the fourth phase), assisted by a further round of training, and in accordance with guidelines laid down, in another significant intervention, by the centre. These left a good deal of latitude to the local bodies but were designed to ensure that resources were not devoted disproportionately to 'obvious' infrastructure projects or to service sector activities. The fifth phase had to do with integration of block and district panchayat plans; and the sixth with appraisal of plans. This last gave rise to another ingenious innovation, the Voluntary Technical Corps (VTCs), to which there were recruited many retired government officers with different technical skills, and who were entrusted, together with officials, with the task of assessing the feasibility of project plans. Significantly, the VTCs involved members of the middle class who had hitherto been somewhat alienated from the planning process. Remarkably – the process must have been at least as breathless as my account of it here – plan funds could be released for 1997-98 by June 1997.

The great achievements of the People's Campaign, thus far, apart from impressive physical achievements, lie in the sheer fact of the devolution of such a large quantum of the state's resources to local bodies; in the establishment of a participatory planning process, state-wide; and in the dispelling of scepticism about *grama sabhas*. Up till now, it is the process which has been most important, but increasingly the people themselves will be looking for results. The achievement thus far has been limited: the number of innovative projects has been small; and in the first year allocations to productive sectors were below recommended levels, and even now, two years later, it is far from clear that the local bodies' plans are having a significant impact on production and productivity, though it is to be expected that the effects of production-related activities should take longer to materialize. To begin with, certainly, the programmes were not notably gender-sensitive. And of the important innovation of Beneficiary Committees, set up to oversee the implementation of public works, it is said that 'only a quarter (of them) survived the tendencies for degeneration and functioned effectively as genuine participatory forums'. It is believed, nonetheless, that democratic decentralization has reduced corruption.

The Kerala story exemplifies the dialectics of decentralisation – what I referred to earlier as 'the curious paradox' of effective democratic decentralization, to which Tendler has drawn our attention. It is the extent to which the process of decentralized planning involves interventions from the centre, which has actually given rise to most criticism and controversy in Kerala. It is felt, for example, that too much influence is

exercised by those who may be ‘outsiders’, the technical resource persons, or the members of the Expert Committees which do the appraisal of local plans and projects. Members of the opposition in Kerala believe that the CPI(M) can exercise too much influence by these means. There are questions, here, no doubt. But I believe that there is a necessary tension (‘dialectics’ involves tension) between the centre and local bodies – this is Tendler’s point, too - if democratic decentralization is to function so as both to deepen democracy and bring about meaningful development.

The Kerala story also constitutes a powerful statement against currently the fashionable ideas about ‘social capital’ and ‘civil society’ which have been the subject of this paper. Isaac and Franke write: ‘The role of *political society* in both the state-centred and/or civil-society-led paradigms explaining the decentralization process, is conspicuous by its absence ... But in a situation such as Kerala’s, which is characterised by an active political society with hegemonic positions held by Left political formations, political society holds the key to democratic decentralization’. Here it is not the ‘social capital’ which lies in the congeries of voluntary associations highlighted by Robert Putnam - including choirs, bowling leagues, football teams and the like – which counts, but rather powerful class and mass organizations (which in Kerala encompass nearly one third of the adult population). The People’s Campaign has involved public action, and the interplay between government and people’s organisations, in the context of a political process. The same – *pace* Putnam – may well have held in Italy, where the PCI fostered civic engagement, and it is likely to hold elsewhere, too.

### **Deepening Democracy and Development**

Only time will tell whether Kerala’s experiment with democratic decentralisation will yield the sorts of results in terms of production and productivity which E M S Namboodiripad sought. But there is no doubt that it has increased ‘participation’, in the sense that it has involved more people in decision-making about matters of public concern. What is especially remarkable about it is the way in which planning has been used as a means of encouraging participation and social mobilisation. Perhaps it has drawn on existing ‘social capital’ in neighbourhoods and communities (which might help to account for some of the differences that have appeared between parts of the state). Equally arguably it has been responsible for ‘constructing social capital’, and because of this, through the way in which it has drawn people in to what are clearly ‘civic endeavours’, it has ‘consolidated civil society’. But it has all taken place in the context of a political process in which different groups of actors at different social levels are all involved, not by ‘constructing-social capital-as-local-organisations’ and thereby ‘consolidating civil society’ in place of state action.

### **Bibliographic note:**

Key works on social capital by James Coleman and Robert Putnam can be found on the World Bank’s website on Social Capital (accessible at: [www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital)). Putnam’s books are: *Making Democracy Work: civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton University Press, 1993); and

*Bowling Alone: the decline and revival of community in America* (Simon & Schuster, 2000). An enlightening discussion of Bourdieu's argument about social capital is to be found in Ben Fine's outstanding critical study on *Social Capital and Social Theory* (Routledge, 2000). Theda Skocpol's critical commentary on Putnam's American adventures is in an article entitled 'Unravelling from above' which was in *The American Prospect* in 1996. The major (and utterly damning, though very courteously expressed) critique of *Making Democracy Work* is by Sidney Tarrow ( *American Political Science Review*. 90(2) 1996, pps 389-97). The study by James Manor referred to is: *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization* (World Bank, 1999). The material that I have drawn from Peter Evans' collaborative research comes from his presentation at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, held in Kerala in May 2000, and entitled 'Ecologies of Local Political Actors and the Struggle for Livability in Third World Cities'. Evans' conclusion to the collection of articles on synergy across the public-private divide that he edited, and which appeared in *World Development* in July 1996, has of course been justifiably influential. Amongst Tony Bebbington's prolific writings I have referred to an article in *The Geographical Journal* in 1997 on 'islands of sustainability in the rural Andes'; and another on 'Capitals and Capabilities: A framework for Analyzing Peasant Viability, Rural Livelihoods and Poverty', which appeared in *World Development* in December 1999. Judith Tandler's major work is *Good Government in the Tropics* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1997). The work referred to by Richard Crook and Alan Sverrisson was written in 1999 and is at present available from the authors at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Finally, Thomas Isaac, as the Member of the State Planning Board responsible for it, has been the principal architect of the Kerala Campaign for Decentralised Planning, and he has written up the experience with the assistance of Richard Franke in a book: *Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala* (Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2000).