

ABOUT KERALA & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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About Kerala

What is Kerala? It is a state in the Republic of India and the attention attracting point is that although this state is considered poor (measured in the GNP per capita) its live quality indicators are comparable to the developed “rich” counties (see: table of life quality indicators in 1993¹).

Indicator	Kerala	India	Low-income countries	United states
Per capita GNP [\$]	180	300	300	24,740
Adult literacy [%]	91	48	51	96
Life expectancy [years]	71	61	56	76
Infant mortality per 1000	13	80	89	9
Birth rate per 1000	17	29	40	16

Interesting fact is that in the time of the founding of Kerala in 1956 it was one of the poorest state of India with highest population growth rate (44 per 1000), but twenty years later despite the similar income the population growth has been stabilized to 18 per 1000.² In 2001 the population was 32 million (3.1% total population of India) spread on the area of 38.850 square kilometers (1.18% of India).³ Another important fact is that the control of population growth was a voluntary result of people’s choice, not like in China with its strict laws concerning population. Sociologists tried to find out what was the cause of such state that is so close to the state in developed countries in Western Europe and USA. A hint was the similar literacy and life expectancy – successful result of policy of state government, which spent large amounts of state budget for primary and secondary education, health care, immunization, agricultural credits and housing targeted at poor citizens of state. It is worthy to mention that the majority in the government was held most of the time by the communist or socialist party – with program focused on enrichment of poor classes and large redistribution of wealth.

First step was the land reform – an abolition of rice land tenancy, when the land owned by landlord was distributed to the tenants, who become fully entitled small holders. It did not improve the financial situation of agricultural household so dramatically, but it lessened the gap between the classes. Some of the former parasitic landlords sold the land before the reform and acquire the investment capital, all of them send their children to the higher education – they become teachers, administrators and small business people who contributed much to the economy of society.

Other kinds of redistribution were school and nursery lunches, ration shop for fair prices and agricultural labor pensions. All these steps, combined with education and health care for all, bestowed the situation of poor. They ceased to be afraid of uncertain future. They find out and knew that their children will live (decrease in infant mortality) and have a better chance for happy life; a consequential decrease of birth-rate was at hand. The point is that the state ensured the basic needs of life and the people started thinking in a longer run.

As a red line coming through all the reforms is a race for equality and equality among men and women is an essential part of this challenge. It has also some historical roots in Nair caste of Hindus, where about 15% of population lived in joint households – called taravads. A special thing is that the husband could marry into the taravad, but it gave him no permanent right to the property or even to his wife. Women in these households were responsible for the property and children. There was no need for killing the new born girls due to the men’s higher social role and responsibility for a family in other societies. This “anomaly” began to fade when the British took over, but corresponding to the women emancipation in the west, together with lessening of traditional boundaries among castes and equal right for education, the Keralitan women are emancipated, responsible and involved in all part of society. Their participation is essential in a success of Keralitan society.

But it is not all, the women emancipation and participation is a compound of high level of public participation and interest of whole society. It has also historical roots, namely in a mass social and religious demand for reforms with origins in the end of 19th century and continuous struggle until the present time.

We can mention the great Hindu saint and social reformer Shri Narayana Guru, who fearlessly criticized and campaigned against the rigours of the caste system, the Brahmin hegemony and the numerous social disabilities of lower castes. And don't forget to Mahatma Gandhi, who explained the movement as one which was calculated to remove social injustice and to advance the cause of humanity.⁴

Sustainability, efficiency & development

In the second half of 20th century, there were lots of discussions and interventions concerning development, economic growth and help for the countries of "Third World", but now can see that the meaning of these words was changed several times during this period and even now the actors in the discussion are using these words in a different way. Misunderstanding on a language level has significant effect on the real regions and people living there. We can say that in the century of global pollution discovery, the language pollution emerged too. The political speeches are more and more vague; the attempts to address the public often end in speaking to no one; the ideological fight is brought to the reality – dead people and dying nature are the results. How to escape these dark visions? Reasonable attempt is to abandon the top-down direction of solving the problems. Proper solution has to be based on reality, on the local conditions. We can't escape all the time apart the painful reality of "now" to somewhere else's virtual reality of "tomorrow", it is possible only in our mind, in stories, movies and computer games. I am not advising to abandon these pleasures, only to remove them from the center of attention and make a space for a reality. The art is undoubtedly piece in puzzle of reality, but not the whole picture.

The Brundtland commission in 1987 introduced the concept of sustainable development. Next decade was in the token of theories explaining the meanings of famous definition: "... *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*"⁵ This definition may be good, but its explanation could vary a lot as has been shown by Herman Daly⁶ in distinguishing the different levels of sustainability which all of them are based on mentioned definition. So, let's move from definitions and try a bottom-up approach to the concept of sustainability "... *to offer an alternative examination of the concept by arguing that, rather than following a metaphysical approach of postulating a priori how sustainable development ought to be practiced, it is better to follow a practically reflexive approach of looking for a paradigmatic case of a state or society that has some characteristic features of what might be deemed sustainable development.*"²

We propose, that Kerala has these characteristics thus it can be a good example. Here are some bites, describing these viable characteristic:

*"The thrust of local material sufficiency and global non-material (knowledge, culture, etc) sharing is a foundation for a global sustainable economy."*⁷

*"... way of slowing growth to a halt and still spreading the wealth ..."*⁸

*"... living lightly on Earth, using fewer resources, creating less waste."*⁸

*"Where possessions are simple and built to last."*⁸

*"Keralites may need bicycles, so do Americans, since most of us live in urban and suburban communities that could adapt to pedal-powered transportation."*⁸

*"What is a good life?" asks Vishwanathan. "The good life is to be a good neighbor; to consider your neighbor as yourself."*⁸

When we look at Kerala, we have to think about efficiency – in the use of resources. We can claim that in Kerala were people at first *forced* to use natural resources much more efficiently than in developed countries to get a similar living standard, but then they found it useful and now they *want* to use them in this way. Excellent example is the People's Resource Mapping Programme that mobilized the villagers and village-level institutions in order to use and avoid the abuse of landscape. It is based on assumption that local people know at best the landscape they are living in, but it have to be enhanced – by education – that the knowledge may become useful, *communicable*. Another important connection is to the public participation, which have not only the historical tradition in Kerala, but it was also enhanced by the land reform that brought people closer to the land, that made them *care*. This is the point, which is often missing in the developed countries – people do not care much. There is strong feeling that someone (state, or NGOs) have to care, but it is not considered personally. Roots of this opinion may be tracked to the strong emphasis on private property and a feeling that the owner would care, but in a society focused on an immediate success and

economy where property may change the owner very rapidly, the faith in seeing the result of personal interest is weak. In contrast, in Middle and Eastern Europe states, formerly governed by communists, there were the level of public interest even lower, due to the nonexistence of private property and the feeling that “everything is everyone’s, but in fact no one possess it (and if someone do so, he couldn’t come to it legally)”, so why take care? These observations gave us advice: if the state/company is too strong and far away no one take care; redistribution of power and wealth is important and also a particular level of stability, reliability and personal approach.

“Instead of urbanization, ruralization.”⁸

We can read this sentence as an example of self-sufficiency of locals, dependence on local sources with local provision of services. Reason of it is in efficiency combined with stability and reliability. Efficiency is meant in wider sense than only economic lowest market price; it contains the sustainable use of local resources, with respect to the environment, which is also the living environment and thus the people would be aware of the cost of this “externality”. Further assumption is based on this local material sustainability, because if it provides enough for satisfying the needs (food, shelter, clothing) plus some commodities for exchange, it can raise the life confidence of inhabitants, which would be a solid baseline for further development and for opening to the world. With this basic stability the outside world would be considered less threatening and more offering.

It can also bring more fairness in exchange, due to the binding of economy to the ground – localization of exchange of living expenses – and leave the international economy the object it is made for – scarce resources, which should be only the surplus products. Localizing the rights to use of resources and the responsibility for them would limit the exploitation and create a demand for efficient use – for a development that could be sustainable. Side effect of such limitation may be the development in areas like social life, science and art. Living light means freedom for mind.

¹ Richard W. Frank and Barbara H. Chasin: Is Kerala model sustainable? Lessons form the past

² Govindan Parayil: The 'Kerala model' of development: development and sustainability in the Third World

³ Statistics for planning 2001: population – 1.1 Population distribution, percentage decadel growth, sex ratio, population density and literacy rate – India and States 2001
<http://www.kerala.gov.in/vitalstatistics/1.01.pdf>

⁴ Socio-Religious Reform Movements
<http://www.kerala.gov.in/history&culture/socioreligious.htm>

⁵ Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development
http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/cesd_cedd.nsf/html/menu6_e.html

⁶ Herman Daly: Sustainable development: from concept and theory toward operational principles; in Steady state economics, 2nd ed 1991
(Compendium for Political Economy for Environmental Planners, 2003, compiled by Christer Sanne, Urban Studies, KTH)

⁷ Alan Fricker, Sustainable Futures Trust, Wellington, New Zealand,
<http://csf.colorado.edu/seminars/sustecon/Douthwaite.feb98/0137.html>

⁸ Bill Mc Kibben – Hope, human and wild, true stories of living lightly on earth