



# The “New” Kerala Model: Lessons for Sustainable Development

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**Summary.** — The “Kerala model of development” has won wide international attention for its achievements in regard to social development and, to a certain extent, environmental sustainability. The “old” Kerala model, preoccupied with redistributive policies, failed, however, to induce economic development. As a result, attention is now being given to a “new” Kerala model. The new policy explicitly seeks reconciliation of social, productive and environmental objectives at the local level, and tries to develop synergies between civil society, local governmental bodies and the state government. The new Kerala model thus holds important lessons for participatory, community-based sustainable development in India and elsewhere. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s, a number of international development scholars have held up the south Indian state of Kerala as a “model of development” (cf. Ratcliffe, 1978; Morris & McAlpin, 1982; Amin, 1991; Franke & Chasin, 1994). Indeed, Kerala’s development has been remarkable during the past four decades: Public action, including both progressive state interventions and popular movements, has brought about high levels of social development and improved living conditions—particularly for lower classes—in spite of low per capita income and nearly stagnant economic growth rates (Ramachandran, 1997).

Recent studies, however, have questioned the sustainability of the “Kerala model” in light of an unfolding fiscal crisis due to economic stagnation and rising social expenditure (George, 1993). Indeed, researchers as well as politicians have generally acknowledged that these economic weaknesses threaten the sustainability of Kerala’s welfare policies and, in fact, the “old” Kerala model.

Environmental sustainability has been held up as another characteristic of the Kerala model (Parayil, 1996). Most studies, however, have tended to overemphasize positive aspects of Kerala’s environmental record such as the low level of resource consumption, low population growth rates and moderate industrial

pollution. A careful appraisal of Kerala’s environmental conditions indicates a mixed record (Véron, 2000). In terms of sustainable development, what is more important than the allegedly achieved environmental sustainability, are the recent policies of Kerala’s state government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and popular movements.

In the 1990s, a “new” Kerala model began to emerge—one that promised to better integrate sustainable-development goals into policy-making, and to go beyond mere state regulation (setting and monitoring environmental standards) to include community-based strategies for environmental protection. The new policy approach comprises decentralized administration; participatory planning combining productive and environmental objectives; and collaboration between the state, NGOs and civic movements. This far-reaching experiment holds important lessons about opportunities and limitations of community-based sustainable development.

Section 2 of this paper clarifies the concept of sustainable development, and introduces policy

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approaches towards this objective, including the community-based strategy and the model of co-management of resources. Section 3 examines features and limitations of the old Kerala model, and discusses the current policy trend towards a new Kerala model. Section 4 analyzes old and new community-based initiatives to achieve sustainable development in Kerala, including discussion of state action, the role of environmental NGOs, grassroots action and environmental ethics. Section 5 analyzes how the recent campaign for democratic decentralization has addressed common failures of community-based strategies and "community failures" (e.g., failure to include people's participation in defining development priorities; community failure to address the needs of future generations; failure to overcome conflicts between local interest groups; failure to reduce spatial externalities and to consider broader political, economic and ecological structures), and in how far the new Kerala model has been successful in overcoming these shortcomings. In conclusion, I argue that the new Kerala model holds some important lessons for community-based sustainable development and co-management of environmental resources, in particular by utilizing synergies between government and civil society at the local level. But, failure to implement complementary regulatory and price instruments for environmental protection at the state level limits Kerala's ability to achieve sustainable development.

## 2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

### (a) *The role of natural, human and social capital*

A widely accepted definition of "sustainable development" put forward by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) is as follows: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 43). While the first part of this definition relates to conventional economic and social objectives of development, the second part incorporates a long-term view, including consideration of environmental issues. It has become common to isolate four factors that determine sustainable development: natural capital, physical or produced capital, human capital, and more recently,

social capital (World Bank, 1997). Sustainability, or the capability of future generations to meet their needs, is ensured when the total stock of these assets remains constant or is increased in the production process. Natural capital and social capital have generally been undervalued because both are public goods or "club goods" (i.e., goods that are indivisible but exclude nonmembers), respectively (Pretty, 1998).

Development theory has commonly acknowledged that economic and social development are interrelated. Economic growth is desirable because it makes poverty alleviation easier (Joshi, 1996). Growth is key in providing the means to meet basic needs, to ease poverty, and to generate employment. It nearly always reduces absolute poverty, but it can have varied impact on inequality and not everybody benefits from it (Fields, 1999). Economic sustainability in terms of sustained macroeconomic growth is thus a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for sustainable development in developing countries. An even distribution of growth and of access to resources is equally important. If, on the contrary, there are strong economic inequalities, "growth without development" as well as social and political unrest are likely to occur, signifying unsustainable development.

Furthermore, social development, apart from being an end in itself, is also a means to promote economic growth. Drèze and Sen (1997) have argued that the expansion of social opportunity is key to development. Extension of basic education, better health care, more effective land reforms and greater access to provisions of social security would enable the marginalized sections of society to lead a less restricted life and, also, to make better use of markets (Drèze & Sen, 1997). The expansion of social opportunity calls for public action, both from the state and the civil society. But, lack of economic growth and fiscal crisis often affect the political will of governments to invest in social services such education and health (Weiner, 1999). NGOs and community organizations have limited resources and reach for replacing crucial state services. What is needed for sustainable development, therefore, are both an active state enhancing social opportunity and a strong economic basis.

Recently, the importance of social capital, including trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement, has been stressed for the success of development (Putnam, 1993;

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