

## Decentralised Governance – Kerala state, India

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Kerala is a densely populated state of 35 million people in South West India. Led by the Left Democratic Front, it stands out among India's 28 states for its successful performance during COVID-19. As a first step, in mid-January Kerala prepared itself on the health front by creating a Corona Control Room with 18 task forces to combat the coronavirus. By the end of March, a set of thoughtful measures were crafted to mitigate the adverse effects of a stringent lockdown on people's lives and livelihoods, with a commitment of US\$ 271 million (Rs.20,000 crores). The design of these measures and its implementation are not just humanitarian, but egalitarian. They stand up to scrutiny of human rights principles, and are remarkable for actually reaching the proverbial last mile in the state. How does Kerala manage to achieve this? What are the specific features of the state that make it possible?

First, Kerala has a century-long history of struggle over rights in the public sphere. The state is vibrant with social movements and civil society initiatives. The social contract is strongly mediated by different interest groups negotiating their rights with the state. The development discourse and practice, over time, is deeply imbricated with norms of social

justice, and policies that respect the rights of marginalized groups. There is a constant pressure and demand from below to deliver.

Second, in 1996, the state initiated a process of democratic decentralization by devolving power and finances (35%) to Local Self-Governance Institutions (LSGIs) called "panchayats". These are elected bodies in a three-tier system, with the village as the last tier of decentralized governance with quotas for women, scheduled castes and tribes. A People's Plan Campaign in the Panchayats was initiated by the Left Democratic Front government, where local people decide priorities for funds allocation and programmes. Several state departments are governed by these local village councils, including health and education.

Third, the decentralization process has deepened democracy and the distribution of public goods. Ward-level committees, led by elected members of the panchayats, enable a structure and a system to foreground the interests of marginalized communities and reach the last-person. Finally, the state has sponsored Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs), led exclusively by women, called "Kudumbasree". There are 4.5 million women in 300,000

Kudumbasree groups with representation of transgender people, seniors and disabled people. They work in collaboration with the panchayats to deepen democratic governance further.

When the coronavirus hit, the state prioritized testing, contact tracing, treatment and quarantine. Dedicated COVID Treatment Centres were set up in the public health system with state-of-the-art infrastructure, facilities and skilled healthcare providers. Testing and treatment are free, universally available and accessible. As the number of cases has risen, Kerala has decentralized care further, with COVID First-Line Treatment Centres at the village panchayat level with quarantine facilities. Seniors, pregnant people, and those with morbidities are prioritized as vulnerable and are given special care. The state provided relief package is routed through the panchayats. The package initially included universal food provisioning but is currently targeted to the vulnerable. In addition, there are pension payments for the elderly, allocations for a rural job-guarantee scheme, interest-free consumer loans routed through women's groups, mental health helplines, helplines for domestic violence victims, waiver of debt payments, utility payments for electricity

and water and financial support for 5.5 million wage workers through labour welfare boards. Some 300,000 stranded migrant workers were housed in camps with food, medicine, health check-ups, helplines, complimentary mobile talk time and leisure games and activities. Internet providers were instructed to enhance

bandwidth to facilitate work and study from-home. The digital divide for school children in Kerala has been addressed innovatively by either distributing smartphones and TVs in remote areas, or converting community libraries into facilities for study for groups of ten.

The state's commitment to social justice, an architecture of decentralized governance to operationalize state policies, and a vocal rights-aware population ensure transparency and accountability. This is the key to Kerala's success.