

Building Local Democracy: Evaluating the Impact of Decentralization in Kerala, India

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Summary. — Historically, local rural governments in India have enjoyed very limited powers and citizens have been afforded very few opportunities to shape local development. In 1996, the state government of Kerala initiated the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning” devolving new authority and resources to panchayats and mandating structures and processes designed to maximize the direct involvement of citizens in planning and budgeting. In both its scope and design, these reforms represent the most ambitious effort to build local institutions of participatory democratic governance ever undertaken in the subcontinent. This paper provides a detailed evaluation and analysis of the formative period of the reforms based on extensive survey data collected in 2002 from a sample of 72 randomly selected panchayats.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, local rural governments in India have enjoyed very limited powers and citizens have been afforded very few opportunities to shape local development. The 73rd Constitutional amendment passed in 1993 aimed to remedy this democratic deficit by granting local rural governments new powers and making them more accountable to citizens. Implementation was however left to the states, and as is always the case in India, inter-state variation has been pronounced. The most determined effort at democratic decentralization has been in the state of Kerala. In 1996, a coalition of left parties led by the Communist Party of India—Marxist (CPI(M)) returned to power and immediately fulfilled one of its most important campaign pledges by launching the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning.” All

1,214 local governments in Kerala—municipalities and the three rural tiers of district, block, and gram panchayats—were given new functions and powers of decision making, and were granted discretionary budgeting authority over

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35–40% of the state's developmental expenditures. In addition to devolving resources, state officials sought to directly promote participatory democracy by mandating structures and processes designed to maximize the direct involvement of citizens in planning and budgeting. In both its scope and design, the campaign represents the most ambitious and concerted state-led effort to build local institutions of participatory democratic governance ever undertaken in the subcontinent. This paper provides a detailed evaluation and analysis of the first four years of decentralization based on extensive records and survey data collected in 2002 from a sample of 72 randomly selected panchayats.¹

2. DEMOCRATIC DEEPENING

The debate on democracy has shifted from the study of transitions to formal democratic rule, to the study of democratic deepening (Lin & Stepan, 1996). Of the many conceptual reformulations this has called for, none has been more central than a reexamination of the question of political participation. Going beyond the traditional focus on electoral participation, increased attention has been directed toward the importance of direct participation—that is, direct forms of engagement with public decision-making entities and processes—in determining the quality and depth of democratic institutions. In the developing world, participation is seen as critical to increasing the overall capabilities of citizens (Drèze & Sen, 1995), strengthening fragile democracies, improving the quality of governance, and countering the influence of organized and powerful dominant groups (Avritzer, 2002).

The challenge of promoting direct participation is particularly acute in contexts where the authority of the modern, rational–legal state is contested by various forms of social power (Migdal, Kohli, & Shue, 1994). Under such conditions, even when representative democratic institutions are well established, basic rights of association are distorted by pervasive vertical dependencies (clientelistic relationships), routinized forms of social exclusion (e.g., the caste system, *purdah*) and the unevenness and at times complete failure of public legality. In many democracies, the public authority of the modern state radiates out unevenly, and “the components of democratic legality and, hence, of publicness and citizen-

ship, fade away at the frontiers of various regions and class, gender and ethnic relations (O'Donnell, 1993, p. 1361).” The resulting disjuncture between formal and actionable rights is reflected in the predominance of oligarchical parties and patrimonial bureaucracies. The resulting institutional matrix favors vertical, back-door, and elite-based forms of participation, over horizontal, transparent, and citizen-based forms of participation. This problem becomes even more acute when one considers the weakness and even complete absence in much of the developing world of *local* democratic government.

Any theory of democratic deepening must as such explicitly take into account how unequal social relations and uneven institutional environments impinge upon the exercise of citizenship. Yet when one considers that this point has achieved axiomatic status in the literature on democratic deepening in the developing world (Huber, Rueschemeyer, & Stephens, 1997; O'Donnell, 1993), it is surprising just how thin the empirical literature remains and how little we actually know about the variability of citizenship densities. In large part the problem stems from the myopias of disciplinary specializations. Much of the political science and macro-sociology literature take national institutions as the unit of analysis, neglecting as such the vast underside of local political life. Conversely, the literature that explores social relations and politics at the local level usually pays scant attention to the larger institutional context and, based as it is on case studies, does not lend itself to generalization.

In this light, the recent wave of decentralization initiatives in the developing world presents a new and critical opportunity for research and theory. This is especially true in India, where the passage of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments marks a natural experiment of sorts: a single treatment of basic institutional reform (empowering local governments), to be carried out by varied political units with different political configurations (states) across an extremely heterogeneous social landscape.² The opportunities for empirical evaluation are all the more tantalizing because of the relatively low starting point: weak, if not altogether absent, local democratic institutions.

One of the defining characteristics of post-colonial democracies is that they have comparatively centralized states, with few, if any local arenas in which citizens can meaningfully participate. In the case of India, even though

citizens vote in much higher percentages than in most democracies and subordinate group electoral participation is increasing (Yadev, 2000), and even though Indians are probably far more likely to participate in contentious action than is the norm for older democracies, the average citizen enjoys few opportunities to engage government between elections. The sociological problem has been extensively examined: the associational field is marked by direct barriers to participation in the form of enforced social exclusions and indirect barriers in the form of group-bounded distributions of social, cultural, and educational capital.³ The institutional space for the exercise of local citizenship is also highly constrained. Before the passage of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment, local governments had little authority, few resources and were subject to limited electoral accountability.⁴ The development functions of local governments were limited to acting as implementation agencies for line department schemes and ordinary citizens were afforded few opportunities to directly engage in or influence decision making about public allocations.⁵ The first chief minister of Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, made this point succinctly when he noted that "if at the level of centre-state relations the constitution gave us democracy, at the level of state-panchayat relations the constitution gave us bureaucracy."⁶

Some commentators have gone so far as characterize the state in India as "democratic authoritarian" (Jalal, 1995). If such an assessment is overly reductionist, ignoring the dynamics of electoral competition and significant zones of democratic engagement that formal rights allow for, the point remains that the day-to-day exercise of citizenship is made particularly difficult by the insularity and distance of state authority and the overall unevenness of public legality. Thus even as India boasts one of the most stable and vibrant democracies in the developing world, civic-based participation remains poorly developed, resulting in what Chhibber (1999) has described as "democracy without associations." Chatterjee takes this reasoning one step further by arguing that most inhabitants of India "are not proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state" (2001, p. 8). In light of these assessments, it is difficult to overstate the transformative possibilities of democratic decentralization in India. Creating genuine institutions of local government is tantamount to expanding the

associational field, and more specifically to increasing the opportunities and the effects of direct citizen participation in government. It is equally difficult to overstate the significant obstacles that democratic decentralization faces.

3. THE CAMPAIGN

Decentralization in Kerala presents an important test case of the possibilities and determinants of democratic deepening. The People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning (the "campaign" hereafter) was specifically conceived as a vehicle for deepening democracy.⁷ We focus on the first four years of reform, a period that can aptly be called the "campaign" because of the mobilizational mode in which it was implemented. This period marked a decisive rupture with the past, setting in motion processes that have seen a very significant devolution of resources and authority to the panchayat level. The Left Democratic Front (LDF) was voted out of power in 2001 (in keeping with an unbroken pattern in Kerala of incumbent governments losing elections), and the subsequent period under a United Democratic Front (UDF) Government led by the Congress Party ushered in a very different stage of the reforms, marked in particular by the challenges of institutionalization and strengthening of local governance. Though our data do not cover this period, it must be noted that in contrast to earlier efforts at decentralization in Kerala the reforms introduced with the campaign have largely been sustained. In Kerala's highly partisan political environment, the campaign has been the subject of fierce political debate, but fiscal devolution has been preserved and no key legislative provisions have been altered. A 2006 report by the State Planning Board found that "Panchayati Raj had been mainstreamed in Kerala ... and that there is widespread consensus across the political spectrum in Kerala that Panchayati Raj must be strengthened and supported in Kerala (The Hindu, May 11, 2006)." The LDF government that was returned to power in May 2006 has expressed its commitment to deepening the reforms.

The campaign was the product of a long history of broad-based demands for democratic reform emanating from many quarters, including Gandhian factions of the Congress party and a range of Left social movements. Begin-

ning with the first democratically elected CPI ministry of 1957, there have been repeated attempts to decentralize. For reasons that have been examined elsewhere (Heller, 2005; Tornquist, 1997), the pressures for decentralization reached something of a critical political mass with the return of the CPI(M) to power in 1996.

As a set of far-reaching institutional reforms, the campaign evolved from a comprehensive critique of the inefficacies of top-down, insulated, command-and-control bureaucracies and of the myriad problems, both practical and normative, of the local participation deficit. If the institutional goals of the campaign amounted to nothing less than creating local self governments with new resources and authority, the political goal was to use planning as an instrument of mobilization (Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2002). As structured by the implementing agency—the Kerala State Planning Board (SPB)—the campaign was designed to create an active role for local citizens in shaping local development policy making and budgeting. Thus, not only were local governments charged with designing and implementing their own development plans (which included designing and financing projects across the full range of development sectors), but they were also mandated to do so through an elaborate series of nested participatory exercises in which citizens are given a direct role in shaping—rather than just choosing—policies and projects. On both counts—local planning and citizen governance—the campaign goes well beyond decentralization in West Bengal and Karnataka, the two most carefully documented cases of successful decentralization in India (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2004; Crook & Manor, 1998). These elaborate institutional designs were publicized through intensive media campaigns, conferences, and a massive training program. The basic nested structure of participation in the annual planning and budgeting cycle consists of four discrete stages:

(1) Gram Sabhas are held at the ward level (there are 10–12 wards in a panchayat). The first Gram Sabha serves as an open forum in which residents identify local development problems, generate priorities, and form sub-sector Development Seminars in which specific proposals first take shape. Subsequent Gram Sabhas select beneficiaries for targeted schemes. The Gram Sabhas are open meetings, presided by local elected officials, and facilitated by the Key Resource Persons (KRPs). They are always held on

holidays, and in public buildings (usually schools). Preparations for the assemblies include extensive publicity, and the distribution of various planning documents. Minutes are kept, and each sub-sector group presents a report of its deliberations and produces a list of “felt needs.”

(2) Development Seminars develop integrated solutions for various problems identified at Gram Sabhas. The Seminars are constituted of representatives selected by the Gram Sabhas, members of panchayat samithi, local political leaders, key officials of the area, and experts from the locality and outside. The seminars were required to produce a comprehensive planning document for the panchayat.

(3) Task Forces are selected by the Development Seminars and are charged with converting the broad solutions of the seminars into project/scheme proposals to be integrated into the final panchayat plan. In general, a Task Force is constituted for each of 10 development sectors, including women’s development, and includes a member of the panchayat samithi, the relevant local official and representatives selected by the Gram Sabhas.

(4) The fourth phase of the annual planning exercise is the actual formulation of the panchayat or municipal budget. Drawing on the shelf of sectoral projects designed by the Task Forces, the panchayat drafts local plan based on available budgetary resources, which include grant-in-aid (the largest component), own resources (local taxes and local resource mobilization) and state or center-project funds.

Beyond its institutional design, the “mobilizational” character of the campaign needs to be highlighted. The state—and specifically the SPB—not only provided the procedural templates, technical assistance and key oversight functions, and administrative capacity, but also launched a massive training program of “Key Resource Persons” at the local and district level than involved over 100,000 people. In subsequent years these training programs were extended, and were more specifically targeted at women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs).⁸ Civil society organizations also played a critical role in designing and implementing the campaign, most notably the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP)—the People’s Science Movement (Kannan, 2000; Parameswaran, 2000, 2001).⁹ Parties and their

affiliated organizations played a direct role in mobilizing participants. The KSSP supplied many field coordinators as well as the overwhelming majority of officials in the State Planning Board. Also, in designing the campaign the SPB relied heavily on a stock of practical knowledge and ideas drawn from a 25-year repertoire of local level initiatives and planning experiments led by the KSSP and other NGOs.¹⁰ During the course of the campaign, the KSSP and women's groups were also instrumental in organizing Neighborhood Groups that were designed to increase women's participation. In all of these respects, the campaign stands apart from most decentralization reforms in the degree to which the boundaries between the state and civil society were blurred, both in terms of design and implementation. In this sense, the campaign is very much an example of the type of synergistic state-society relations that Evans (1996) and others have argued are key to sustained institutional reforms.

4. THE DATA

The data we report here were collected from 72 (out of 990) rural panchayats selected through stratified random sampling. The stratification was designed to yield a sample that was representative of regions and of the distribution of ruling political coalitions. The resulting sample was found to be statistically representative along a wide range of basic socio-economic factors (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2004). In each panchayat, investigators collected data on socio-economic conditions and on the implementation of the campaign (participation figures, panchayats organizing activities, committee composition, etc.). In each panchayat, we also administered a questionnaire to 13 key respondents—politicians, government officials and representatives of civil society organizations—in every panchayat. We chose key respondents over random respondents because we required informants with a detailed knowledge of local political and socio-economic conditions and most importantly with a detailed and practical understanding of the implementation and impact of the campaign. Surveying key respondents or experts to develop profiles of communities or complex institutional arrangements is a well established method for medium-N studies (Evans & Rauch, 1999). We moreover designed the sample of key respondents to *maximize* the range of opinions. First,

we surveyed members of both the ruling party (i.e., the party with a majority of the elected positions in the panchayat council) and the main opposition party. Second, we spread our sample across the three sectors of government, elected representatives, and representatives of key civil society organizations. For reasons we elaborate throughout the paper, the different structural positions of each of these three sectors should shape (though not mechanically determine) *a priori* interests *vis-a-vis* the campaign. Third, we recorded the political affiliation (or lack thereof) of each of our respondents. Given Kerala's highly partisan political scene, political affiliation should shape views of the campaign. In each panchayat, investigators identified and interviewed one individual in each of the following 13 categories: panchayat member from ruling coalition; panchayat member from the main opposition party; head of the local branch of ruling party (but not panchayat member); head of the local branch of main opposition party (but not panchayat member); three government officials (panchayat secretary and two line department officials); six civil society activists (one civilian Task Force member and one representative each from a local union, a religious organization, a development NGO, a women's organization and an SC/ST organization). The survey included a total of 220 questions and took on average 4–5 hours to administer. Questions covered three general areas: the characteristics of the panchayat (local social and political relations, social movement history, level of development), the process of the campaign (how participation and decision making evolved), and the impact of the campaign on development, civil society, and social inclusion. In all, 858 key respondents were interviewed.¹¹

5. THE GENERAL IMPACT OF THE CAMPAIGN 1996–2001

A number of studies have already established that in institutional terms the campaign resulted in a significant reorganization of the state and governance, and that the level and scope of decentralization surpasses what has been achieved in most (and possibly all) Indian states since the 1993 constitutional amendments (Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2002; Véron, 2001; World Bank, 2000). First, there has been a very substantial fiscal decentralization: 35–40% of all developmental expenditures have

been allocated directly to local governments (including village, block, and district panchayats, as well as municipalities). The largest component of these funds—grants-in-aid—are under the direct control of panchayats. The increase in the discretionary portion of village panchayat budgets has been dramatic, jumping from Rs. 1,000 million in 1996–97 (the year before the campaign) to 4,204 million in 1997–98, and over 5,000 million in each of the three years that follow (Government of Kerala, State Planning Board, 2001). In comparative terms, the scale of the devolution is also significant. A World Bank report found that Kerala has the greatest degree of local expenditure autonomy and is the most fiscally decentralized state in India, and second only to Columbia in the developing world (2000, vol. I, pp. 28–29).¹² In their review of the campaign, Chathukulam and John conclude that “the lack of finance will no longer be a major hurdle for local bodies” (2002, p. 19).

Second, the campaign has brought very significant devolution of authoritative decision-making powers. The legislative architecture of the campaign empowers panchayats with full authority to plan, fund, and implement a full range of development policies and projects. As of 1999, Kerala was the only state along with West Bengal where there was no cap on the powers of panchayats to sanction expenditures (Chaudhuri, 2006). Although during the campaign projects were subject to sanction by a district level technical committee, these committees acted mainly in an advisory capacity. The SPB has also stipulated broad patterns of expenditure (e.g., 40% of the budget must go to economic development) and imposed mandatory minimum expenditures on SC/STs and women. These guidelines notwithstanding, there is little doubt that panchayats enjoyed and exercised a wide degree of discretionary authority in budgeting, and that these prerogatives have been preserved in the post-campaign period (2001–present). The degree and uniformity of institutional activity during the campaign is reflected in our finding (based on local records and the survey) that all the panchayats in our sample held Gram Sabhas on a regular basis, constituted Task Forces, developed local plan documents, and created beneficiaries committees.

Third, as a number of studies have documented, participation in the campaign was high. In an analysis of SPB data collected from Gram Sabha registries, Chaudhuri and Heller

(2003) found that in each of the first two years of the campaign, 1.8 million people attended planning Gram Sabhas. The social composition of participation was also quite inclusionary, with women representing 41% of participants by the second year, and SC/STs actually being overrepresented.¹³

In sum, local governments in Kerala now make real decisions based on significant levels of citizen participation. But this leaves open two sets of questions that need to be explored much more closely. First, what has been the substantive developmental impact of local government under the campaign? Have the devolved funds been spent effectively? Did local allocation of development resources improve upon the prior model of department-driven development? Have there been, in other words, efficiency gains from devolution? The literature on decentralization generally takes for granted the comparative advantage of local government in identifying and targeting local developmental needs. In institutional terms, the informational and allocative advantages of the subsidiarity principle are clear, but if governance is as much about institutions as it is about power, then allocative gains will depend on the institutional interface with local social and political conditions, including well-known problems of local elite capture (Mohan & Stokke, 2000). As such it needs to be demonstrated that local allocative power does indeed produce comparatively superior outcomes, a demonstration that has only rarely been made in the literature.

Second, to what extent did the campaign contribute to empowering citizens? Definitional problems with concepts of empowerment aside, the campaign was designed with the intent of increasing the level and the effect of direct involvement of citizens in the decision-making processes of local government. As measured by attendance at Gram Sabhas, participation levels were high. But while participation in popular assemblies is in and of itself meaningful and certainly demonstrates that the process carries a certain legitimacy (otherwise ordinary citizens would not make the effort to attend), one has to be guarded when dealing with non-electoral forms of participation of conflating involvement with actual influence.¹⁴ In dealing with this problem, we argue for three separate lines of analysis. The first, and most obvious in an inegalitarian society, is the depth of participation (i.e., the magnitude and social composition of participation). The second is the

quality of participation, that is, the extent to which the participatory process approximates a deliberative process that involves substantive public discussions and efforts to identify common interests rather than just the aggregative logic of voting or the mobilization of resources associated with bargaining. The third is the *process* dimension of participation, that is, the extent to which participatory inputs wind their way through institutions and are translated into actual outputs.

6. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT OF THE CAMPAIGN

Measuring the development impact of decentralization is notoriously difficult. Expenditure data for local governments are often unreliable (Bardhan, 2002), before and after comparisons are hard to construct¹⁵ and it is difficult to actually isolate the impact of local government given a range of other intervening variables that are either difficult to measure or go unobserved. The survey however did produce data from key respondents, who as informed local actors are well positioned to evaluate the developmental impact of the campaign. The key respondents answered a series of questions

about the nature of services (such as health care, education, roads) and about development activities (such as housing for the poor, support of agriculture, efforts to improve income and employment), both before and after the campaign.

As has been well documented in the literature, Kerala leads all major Indian states in social development indicators and in the past two decades has seen the most rapid decline of rural poverty rates of any Indian state (Ravallion & Datt, 1999). Yet despite Kerala's track record, our respondents felt that the initial quality of services and development in 1996—that is, before the campaign was launched—was poor. For all but three areas (education, child care, and health), a majority of respondents judged the quality to be “low” or “very low,” with employment generation and anti-poverty measures receiving particularly low marks. It is also noteworthy that the lowest score was for “efforts to improve income and employment for women.” Our respondents were then asked whether the quality of services and development, in each of 13 categories, had improved, deteriorated or stayed the same during the five years of the campaign during 1996–2001. As the results in Table 1 indicate, for every category, a large majority of respondents felt there

Table 1. Respondents' assessment of the magnitude and direction of the change in service delivery and development as a result of the campaign

| Indicator (quality, accessibility, and/or level, depending on the indicator) | Fraction of respondents who said situation in panchayat had | | | | | No. of respondents |
|--|---|------|-----------|----------|---------------|--------------------|
| | Deteriorated | | No change | Improved | | |
| | Significantly | Some | | Some | Significantly | |
| Primary health care | 0.3 | 1.2 | 9.1 | 66.1 | 23.4 | 816 |
| Child care and child development | 0.2 | 0.5 | 1.6 | 36.5 | 61.2 | 825 |
| Primary education | 0.1 | 0.7 | 16.8 | 60.9 | 21.5 | 806 |
| Drinking water | 0.0 | 1.4 | 8.2 | 48.1 | 42.3 | 813 |
| Sanitation | 0.3 | 0.4 | 9.3 | 48.5 | 41.7 | 811 |
| Housing for the poor | 0.1 | 0.5 | 0.8 | 28.3 | 70.3 | 832 |
| Assistance to poor | 0.0 | 0.3 | 10.5 | 56.9 | 32.4 | 809 |
| Roads | 0.2 | 0.2 | 3.1 | 34.1 | 62.3 | 827 |
| Irrigation facilities | 0.3 | 1.6 | 13.1 | 61.7 | 23.4 | 811 |
| Support for agricultural cultivators | 0.2 | 1.1 | 8.5 | 61.8 | 28.4 | 821 |
| Income and employment creation | 0.3 | 1.1 | 25.9 | 62.7 | 10.0 | 807 |
| Income and employment for women | 0.1 | 0.7 | 17.7 | 56.1 | 25.4 | 816 |
| Income and employment for SCs or STs | 0.3 | 0.6 | 21.1 | 56.9 | 21.2 | 807 |

had been improvement (either “some” or “significant”). In 5 of 13 categories, over 40% of the respondents felt that there had been “significant” improvement. The performance of panchayats was however uneven across areas. The campaign’s most marked successes were in building roads, housing for the poor, and anganwadis (child services) where almost two-thirds felt the difference was significant. In contrast, less than a fourth of respondents felt that the panchayats had made a significant difference in economic development (employment, agricultural support, and irrigation).

Even more revealing than this overall finding is what we find when we disaggregate responses by the identity and function of the respondent. Kerala has a long history of highly partisan local politics. Local elections to the panchayat are fiercely contested by all the major political parties, electoral participation is high, social movements and community-based organizations are active (and often contentious) and surveys show that Keralites are far more ideological and likely to vote along party lines than in other states (Beasely *et al.*, 2004). We would as such anticipate sharply differentiated views of the campaign. Yet the overall positive impression of the impact of the campaign holds true across all respondent categories (see Table 2). Thus for all 13 questions, a majority in *all* respondent categories (which includes government officials, ruling politicians, opposition politicians, and civil society actors) felt there had been improvement. It is particularly instructive to note the response of opposition politicians who logically would be more skeptical of the campaign’s impact. The *Heads of the Local Branch of the Opposition Party* had an overwhelmingly positive view of the campaign. Similarly, government officials from line departments, who stand to lose from the devolution of authority to local elected officials and civil society, also had an overwhelmingly positive view. In sum, irrespective of their function or political affiliation, our respondents believe that the campaign led to improvement in development.¹⁶

When we examine the percentage of respondents who expressed the strongest positive opinions, that is, those who indicated “significant improvement,” the patterns reveal more pronounced differences of opinion (Tables 3a and 3b). As one might also expect, the *Head of the local branch of the main opposition party* was consistently least likely of all respondents to feel that there had been significant improve-

ment, to the point of being something of an outlier. His or her political party counterpart who serves on the panchayat samithi however held views that were consistently closer to those of the ruling-party panchayat member. In other words, elected representatives from different parties are more likely to share similar views of the campaign than elected and non-elected officials of the same party. This indicates that function plays a more significant role in shaping opinions than party. Given Kerala’s context of highly partisan local politics, this is somewhat surprising, but may speak to the fact that support for an increased role for local government was bi-partisan.

The differences of opinion between government officials are also telling. Line department officials had a lower evaluation across all categories than the *panchayat secretary*. This gap might be explained by the differences in their ties to the state. Panchayat secretaries have a long history of working with and for local government. Line department officials however answered to their departments before their positions were changed by the campaign. It is widely reported that line department officials resisted the campaign, both because of existing patterns of line department controlled patronage and the status loss associated with being made subordinate to local elected officials (Chathukulam & John, 2002).

The pattern across the civil society respondents (the bottom six rows of Table 3a) also reveals some interesting trends. Overall, these respondents had views that are closest to those of politicians in the panchayat samithi. But within this group there is a clear outlier, the *representative of caste associations or religious organizations*. Across every category, these respondents had lower evaluations than the representatives of functional organizations. One must be careful of reading too much into this finding, but the trend is certainly consistent with assumptions made in the democracy literature that secular organizations are more likely to favor inclusive forms of representation than organizations built on the strength of primary identities. In the Kerala context, where Muslim and Christian community organizations have a long history of opposition to the CPI(M), this pattern may also simply reflect political positions.

Finally, party affiliation clearly shapes views of the campaign. Those who identified with parties aligned with the LDF had distinctly more favorable opinions of the campaign than

Table 2. Fraction (%) of respondents, by category and indicator, who felt situation in panchayat had improved as a result of the campaign

| Respondent category | Primary health | Child care | Primary education | Drinking water | Sanitation | Assistance for poor | | |
|---|----------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| | | | | | | Housing | Other | |
| Panchayat member from ruling party or coalition | 92.0 | 98.7 | 88.2 | 96.1 | 97.4 | 97.4 | 89.5 | |
| Panchayat member from opposition | 85.9 | 95.4 | 73.4 | 87.3 | 89.1 | 100.0 | 85.9 | |
| Head of local branch of ruling party | 87.7 | 95.4 | 87.7 | 92.3 | 92.4 | 100.0 | 86.2 | |
| Head of local branch of main opposition party | 80.3 | 90.3 | 65.6 | 79.4 | 77.8 | 95.2 | 79.4 | |
| Panchayat secretary | 95.3 | 98.5 | 85.7 | 95.3 | 95.3 | 98.5 | 89.1 | |
| Panchayat-level implementing officer | 92.6 | 96.4 | 84.9 | 86.8 | 86.8 | 98.2 | 84.9 | |
| Other line department official | 90.8 | 100.0 | 84.4 | 87.5 | 84.4 | 98.5 | 92.1 | |
| Civilian Task Force member | 96.7 | 100.0 | 86.4 | 91.8 | 93.3 | 100.0 | 91.5 | |
| Representative of caste or religious organization | 74.6 | 100.0 | 71.7 | 88.5 | 86.5 | 96.3 | 84.6 | |
| Representative of labor union or farmers' association | 96.7 | 98.4 | 84.5 | 88.3 | 86.4 | 98.4 | 95.1 | |
| Representative of development NGO | 92.4 | 96.9 | 84.9 | 92.4 | 92.4 | 100.0 | 95.5 | |
| Representative of women's group | 90.3 | 100.0 | 87.3 | 93.8 | 95.2 | 100.0 | 93.7 | |
| Representative of SC or ST organization | 85.7 | 100.0 | 83.6 | 93.6 | 91.9 | 98.4 | 91.5 | |
| | | | Roads | Irrigation | Support for agriculture | Income and job creation | | |
| | | | | | | General | Women | SC/ST |
| Panchayat member from ruling party or coalition | | 98.7 | 94.7 | 92.1 | 83.8 | 85.5 | 88.2 | |
| Panchayat member from opposition | | 95.4 | 78.5 | 85.9 | 59.7 | 81.5 | 68.8 | |
| Head of local branch of ruling party | | 97.0 | 93.8 | 95.3 | 75.4 | 76.9 | 78.5 | |
| Head of local branch of main opposition party | | 87.1 | 71.0 | 79.4 | 52.4 | 66.7 | 66.7 | |
| Panchayat secretary | | 100.0 | 92.1 | 92.1 | 76.6 | 84.1 | 79.4 | |
| Panchayat-level implementing officer | | 100.0 | 89.7 | 90.0 | 70.9 | 71.4 | 74.1 | |
| Other line department official | | 95.4 | 82.0 | 92.1 | 77.1 | 88.9 | 83.3 | |
| Civilian Task Force member | | 96.8 | 77.8 | 90.3 | 80.0 | 88.5 | 86.4 | |
| Representative of caste or religious organization | | 92.7 | 84.6 | 85.2 | 59.6 | 75.0 | 69.2 | |
| Representative of labor union or farmers' association | | 96.8 | 88.3 | 87.3 | 70.5 | 80.3 | 75.4 | |
| Representative of development NGO | | 100.0 | 86.4 | 96.9 | 80.6 | 85.1 | 80.6 | |
| Representative of women's group | | 96.9 | 83.9 | 93.8 | 78.1 | 87.5 | 87.5 | |
| Representative of SC or ST organization | | 95.2 | 81.4 | 90.2 | 76.3 | 85.0 | 72.9 | |

those with non-LDF affiliations (Table 3b). Those without party affiliations (mostly government officials) fell roughly in between. It should be noted that the difference may in part be an artifact of context. LDF panchayats had higher levels of participation in the initial stages of the campaign than UDF panchayats (Chaudhuri & Heller, 2003) and it is widely believed that LDF panchayats were more active in nurturing local planning. Having said this, UDF respondents still had an overwhelmingly posi-

tive view. In fact, the difference between LDF and UDF respondents is less pronounced than the difference between opposition party panchayat member and opposition branch heads examined earlier (compare with Table 2). This suggests once again that function is more important than party affiliation in shaping opinions of the campaign.

Our data also provide some insight into the redistributive impact of the campaign. First, the high impact areas of the campaign were in

Table 3a. *Fraction (%) of respondents, by category and indicator, who felt situation in panchayat had improved significantly as a result of the campaign*

| Respondent category | Primary health | Child care | Primary education | Drinking water | Sanitation | Assistance for poor | |
|---|----------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------|
| | | | | | | Housing | Other |
| Panchayat member from ruling party or coalition | 26.9 | 67.9 | 26.0 | 49.4 | 47.4 | 75.9 | 40.5 |
| Panchayat member from opposition | 21.2 | 46.3 | 25.8 | 35.4 | 47.0 | 68.7 | 43.9 |
| Head of local branch of ruling party | 25.8 | 68.7 | 22.4 | 47.8 | 52.9 | 80.9 | 40.3 |
| Head of local branch of main opposition party | 10.9 | 40.0 | 15.4 | 25.8 | 26.2 | 42.4 | 19.7 |
| Panchayat secretary | 25.0 | 72.5 | 20.9 | 54.4 | 50.0 | 72.5 | 32.4 |
| Panchayat-level implementing officer | 12.3 | 45.8 | 16.4 | 43.9 | 30.9 | 62.1 | 26.8 |
| Other line department official | 17.9 | 55.1 | 19.7 | 33.3 | 36.4 | 66.7 | 21.5 |
| Civilian Task Force member | 26.2 | 66.7 | 22.2 | 47.7 | 48.4 | 80.6 | 34.9 |
| Representative of caste or religious organization | 14.3 | 56.1 | 11.1 | 30.2 | 30.2 | 60.6 | 24.5 |
| Representative of labor union or farmers' association | 25.0 | 71.8 | 18.0 | 44.4 | 45.2 | 75.8 | 35.9 |
| Representative of development NGO | 35.3 | 67.2 | 20.6 | 38.2 | 38.2 | 75.4 | 33.3 |
| Representative of women's group | 35.4 | 67.6 | 28.8 | 43.3 | 44.6 | 83.8 | 36.4 |
| Representative of SC or ST organization | 26.6 | 68.3 | 29.0 | 50.8 | 46.0 | 71.4 | 31.7 |
| | | Roads | Irrigation | Support for agriculture | Income and job creation | | |
| | | | | | General | Women | SC/ST |
| Panchayat member from ruling party or coalition | 70.9 | 23.4 | 34.2 | 13.3 | 28.9 | 26.3 | |
| Panchayat member from opposition | 54.5 | 34.8 | 36.4 | 14.1 | 20.0 | 20.3 | |
| Head of local branch of ruling party | 70.6 | 32.8 | 30.3 | 9.0 | 23.1 | 20.0 | |
| Head of local branch of main opposition party | 46.2 | 12.7 | 12.3 | 6.1 | 17.5 | 15.9 | |
| Panchayat secretary | 73.5 | 28.4 | 32.8 | 6.0 | 26.9 | 23.8 | |
| Panchayat-level implementing officer | 58.3 | 19.4 | 31.3 | 3.4 | 12.5 | 13.0 | |
| Other line department official | 62.7 | 22.2 | 32.3 | 12.7 | 23.8 | 21.7 | |
| Civilian Task Force member | 62.7 | 26.9 | 31.8 | 10.9 | 32.8 | 25.4 | |
| Representative of caste or religious organization | 51.8 | 13.2 | 20.0 | 9.4 | 23.1 | 19.2 | |
| Representative of labor union or farmers' association | 61.5 | 22.2 | 28.8 | 10.9 | 19.7 | 19.7 | |
| Representative of development NGO | 72.1 | 19.1 | 24.2 | 10.1 | 35.8 | 14.9 | |
| Representative of women's group | 56.7 | 24.6 | 39.4 | 18.2 | 34.4 | 29.7 | |
| Representative of SC or ST organization | 63.5 | 18.0 | 27.4 | 10.0 | 28.3 | 23.7 | |

housing to the poor, child services, and roads. All three of these areas have a pro-poor impact.¹⁷ Second, 89% of the respondents indicated that the primary beneficiaries of the campaign were the “socially and economically disadvantaged,” with only 4.0% indicating the “socially and economically advantaged.” Similarly, when asked if “beneficiaries selected for various schemes under the campaign were more or less likely to be poor than those selected un-

der earlier schemes,” 88% indicated more likely under the campaign.

7. BUILDING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

In this section, we discuss the depth, quality, and process of participation. The literature on participation has demonstrated that even in “mature” democracies, participation rates are

Table 3b. *Fraction (%) of respondents, by party affiliation and indicator, who felt situation in panchayat had improved significantly as a result of the campaign*

| Party affiliation | Primary health | Child care | Primary education | Drinking water | Sanitation | Assistance for poor | |
|---------------------------|----------------|------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------|---------------------|-------|
| | | | | | | Housing | Other |
| LDF affiliation | 32.0 | 68.6 | 25.0 | 47.2 | 48.8 | 83.5 | 42.3 |
| No party affiliation | 23.6 | 65.6 | 24.5 | 42.4 | 45.2 | 67.7 | 29.9 |
| Non-LDF party affiliation | 12.1 | 50.7 | 17.6 | 35.3 | 33.3 | 54.2 | 25.1 |
| | Roads | Irrigation | Support for agriculture | Income and job creation | | | |
| | | | | General | Women | SC/ST | |
| LDF affiliation | 68.3 | 23.5 | 33.9 | 29.5 | 33.5 | 25.4 | |
| No party affiliation | 61.9 | 21.6 | 28.3 | 23.4 | 24.5 | 20.5 | |
| Non-LDF party affiliation | 50.5 | 27.0 | 23.6 | 18.7 | 13.2 | 17.6 | |

highly uneven across socio-economic groups (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Case studies and surveys in India have found that caste and gender present particularly significant barriers to participation (Agarwal, 2001; Chhibber, 2003; Jayal, 2001; Seema & Mukherjee, 2000).¹⁸ Mechanisms of social exclusion include coercion, intimidation, various forms of "social purdah" or deficits in the individual skills, and self-confidence to participate directly and openly in political life. Moreover, even when ordinary citizens do participate, the selectivity of governance institutions intervenes between citizen preferences and policy outputs.

Data collected by the State Planning Board from all 990 panchayats for the first two years of the campaign show that 10.3% of the electorate participated in the first annual Gram Sabhas in 1996 and 10.6% in 1997.¹⁹ The social composition of the campaign improved drastically in the second year. If in the first year of the campaign SC/ST²⁰ participation was well below the average rate (relative participation was 0.53 with 1.0 = participation rate of the general population), by the second year it was 1.44, meaning that SC/STs were participating in greater proportions than non-SCs. Similarly, women's relative participation increased from 0.57 to 0.82, with women constituting 40% of all participants in 1997–98.

The data from our 72 sample panchayats show that while overall participation has declined (falling to 4.7% of total population in 1999 from 7.8% in 1997), its social composition has stabilized. In 1999–2000, women accounted for 41% of participants, and SCs accounted for 14% of participants, well above their proportion of the general population and their 11.5%

representation in the sample. STs on the other hand constituted only 2.6% of participants, well below their 3.7% of the sample population. By comparative standards these are very high levels of subordinate group participation.²¹

We cannot take the democratic effects of Gram Sabhas for granted. Gram Sabhas are fairly large (average attendance in 1999 was 1,271 per panchayat, or roughly 100 per ward) and while they serve important functions of communicating basic information (criteria for beneficiary selection, progress of the preceding years' budget, etc.) and for discussing and airing general demands, they do not directly make budgetary decisions. Development Seminars and Task Forces on the other hand are deliberative bodies charged by the Gram Sabhas with making concrete inputs into the planning and budgeting process. Because they involve substantive decision making and require more skills, these bodies are more likely to be inflected with power relations and one might expect a drop-off in subordinate group participation in these bodies. And indeed, this is what one study for the first year of the campaign found in the case of women (Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2002).

Our data, which are for 1999–2000 and were collected directly from panchayat registers, suggest that there has been an improvement in subordinate group participation. In Development Seminars, we found that women represented on average 39% (78 out of 179 per panchayat) of total participants, only slightly lower than their participation in Gram Sabhas. Likewise, SC participation remains proportionately high at 14.6% (26 out of 179 participants). As we move up the decision-making chain, we find

that in Task Forces women's participation begins to decline. On average, women represented only 30% of participants (24 out of 81). This drop-off may in fact be an institutional artifact since Task Forces are mandated to have an elected councilor and a government official as members, and both categories are overwhelmingly male. SC participation on the other hand remains high at 12.3% (10 out of 81) and still above their representation in the sample (11.5%).

We can develop an even richer picture of the nature of participation in the decision-making chain when we examine the sectoral composition of Task Forces. The Task Forces were designed to be representative of all the key stakeholders in local democratic government, namely elected representatives, government officials, and civil society actors. Since planning and development in India have long been dominated by politicians and officials, the challenge has been to incorporate civil society actors. The campaign appears to have done just that. Over 56% of those who attended Task Force general body meetings in 1999–2000 were either civilian experts or civil society activists, and 19% were party activists. Panchayat members and government officials were roughly represented as officially prescribed (i.e., one panchayat member and one official for each Task Force) with former panchayat members (who could in principle be counted in civil society) making up the balance. Moreover, our survey respondents also clearly found Task Forces to be accountable and representative. Fully 90% said that Task Force members had been appointed in keeping with established procedure (the fact that only 5% did not know is itself telling) and 70% judged that most of the Task Forces in their panchayat were “representative of the stakeholders in that sector” with only 4% indicating that the Task Forces were not representative.

If the actual composition of participatory bodies points to a continuity of representation through the institutional system, it is also important to separately evaluate the actual processing of participatory inputs. What impact did these bodies actually have in making binding decisions? Specifically, to what extent were the “felt needs” (to use the language of the campaign) expressed in the Gram Sabhas actually translated into concrete decisions?²² A very small minority (3.8%) judged the process to be unresponsive, while 30% saw the felt needs of the community as only “occasionally

reflected” in the panchayat plan. Almost 2/3 (64%) of our sample answered that “felt needs are always reflected” in the final plan, including 44% of *heads of local opposition party*, the respondent group with the least favorable view of the campaign. If we examine this question by panchayat, we find that in over 70% of panchayats a majority of respondents gave this answer. Similarly, Task Forces were also very effective: 80% of our respondents said that Task Force projects were “almost always” or “always” included in the final panchayat plan. It is important to remember that the elected members of the panchayat are not legally bound to budget the projects proposed by Task Forces. Some observers have reported that elected representatives saw Task Forces as undermining their authority (Chathukulam & John, 2002). The fact that panchayats did incorporate Task Force projects suggests however that elected representatives feel accountable to the process.²³ More broadly—and this point is critical to any argument for participatory institutions—this demonstrates that representative and participatory democracy can co-exist.

The findings in this section show that the participatory institutions introduced by the campaign were inclusionary, broadly representative, and quite successful in processing popular inputs through the decision-making chain. But newly established institutions, especially at the local level, are readily subverted.²⁴ The literature on decentralization has repeatedly shown how susceptible local democratic institutions are to elite capture and how often they can produce perverse results such as exclusionary practices or rampant rent seeking.²⁵ The architects of the campaign were in fact candid in identifying the “politician-bureaucratic patronage nexus” as the target of reforms and were also acutely aware that in Kerala's environment of highly competitive party politics, patronage constitutes a major developmental problem.²⁶ To what extent has the campaign been subject to such extra-institutional influences?

The most obvious evidence of such influences would be distributional outcomes favoring local elites. Because of its history of land reforms and lower class mobilization, and because of the deep penetration of competitive party politics into rural life, landed elites, or rural oligarchs do not hold significant sway in Kerala (Heller, 1999). As such it is not surprising that less than 4% of respondents felt that “powerful private interests” exerted significant influence

over project selection. They however also responded that government officials had no influence over project selection, a somewhat more surprising finding given the historical power of the development bureaucracy.²⁷

The extent to which patronage has been at work is much harder to gauge. As we saw earlier, the campaign to date has largely benefited the poor, which in itself suggests a high degree of insulation from elite interests. The survey did however yield some evidence of ward-based patronage (arguably the most visible form of patronage in a single member ward system). But as the results reported in Table 4 show, the pattern was hardly egregious, with only 13% of respondents detecting clear ruling-party favoritism.²⁸

Historically, the manipulation of beneficiary lists for projects has been an important source of patronage.²⁹ The campaign introduced a range of procedures, including Gram Sabhas to discuss beneficiary criteria and prescribed periods for public comment on published lists to minimize preferential selection. We found that almost all panchayats followed these procedures. Our respondents moreover felt that this has reduced extra-institutional influence.

Thus 44% of the respondents identified Gram Sabhas as having the most influence over beneficiary selection, followed by panchayat members (17%) and Task Force members (14%). Even more pointedly, when asked "In practice, what do you think are the criteria by which beneficiaries are selected?" less than 1% responded "caste or social status" and only 6.6% pointed to political connections. Finally, when asked if corruption had increased or decreased with the campaign, 74% said "decreased" and 6% said "increased." Even a majority of the *heads of opposition party branches* point to a decrease.

We close this section on participation by addressing its impact on governance. Participation can improve the quality of governance both by providing better inputs (information and ideas) and by holding politicians and bureaucrats more accountable. Accountability can increase both as a result of a system of checks and balances (as in constitutional-legal theories of democracy) and as a result of cooperation between state and civil society actors (as emphasized in the literature on synergy and participatory publics). Both principles were incorporated into the design of the campaign,

Table 4. *Political patronage and the spatial allocation of plan funds*

| Respondent category | Fraction of respondents (by category) who said spatial allocation of funds | | | |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Highly skewed toward ruling-party wards | Slightly favored ruling-party wards | Equally distributed across wards | Based on priorities and needs |
| Panchayat member from ruling party or coalition | 4.0 | 26.3 | 36.8 | 32.9 |
| Panchayat member from opposition | 27.3 | 39.4 | 19.7 | 10.6 |
| Head of local branch of ruling party | 4.4 | 27.9 | 35.3 | 27.9 |
| Head of local branch of main opposition party | 40.3 | 32.3 | 19.4 | 6.5 |
| Panchayat secretary | 9.2 | 29.2 | 26.2 | 26.2 |
| Panchayat-level implementing officer | 6.4 | 22.2 | 23.8 | 22.2 |
| Other line department official | 12.9 | 27.1 | 21.4 | 17.1 |
| Civilian Task Force member | 7.9 | 38.1 | 27.0 | 23.8 |
| Representative of caste association or religious organization | 14.3 | 46.4 | 12.5 | 21.4 |
| Representative of labor union or farmers' association | 9.8 | 42.6 | 23.0 | 21.3 |
| Representative of mass-based development organization | 10.3 | 41.2 | 26.5 | 16.2 |
| Representative of women's group | 9.0 | 34.3 | 34.3 | 17.9 |
| Representative of SC or ST organization | 14.3 | 39.7 | 19.1 | 23.8 |
| Overall | 12.9 | 34.1 | 25.4 | 20.8 |

the first by creating new centers of authority to counterbalance the traditional power of state actors, the second in the co-production design of Task Forces and the planning process in general. It is not possible to disentangle the effects of these two mechanisms, but the general impact appears to be clear.

When asked if the campaign had made “elected representatives more responsive to the needs and opinions of common people” over 92% felt there had been an increase in responsiveness. Not surprisingly, ruling-party respondents had a higher evaluation of their accountability and the head of the local opposition branch a much lower evaluation (though even this group overwhelmingly found there was an improvement). Most telling is that civil society respondents scored the increase in accountability of representatives higher than the overall average. When asked the same question about government officials, only 75% felt there had been an improvement. This confirms the wide spread assumption that government officials have been more resistant than local politicians to the campaign.

Because of its successful land reforms and a social structure that is far less unequal in caste and class terms than is true for most of rural India, decentralization in Kerala was far less vulnerable to elite capture. Nonetheless, local development projects in Kerala were historically dominated by the department-based bureaucracy and patronage politics. The campaign appears to have tackled these problems with some success. Despite the fact that the resources and authority that were devolved were significant, our sample of local political and civil society elites overwhelmingly judged the campaign to have reduced existing levels of corruption and to have increased transparency and accountability of both representatives and officials.³⁰ Of course, some of our respondents have an ideological or even material stake in the campaign. But the fact that these assess-

ments hold true across all our respondent categories, including civil society actors, suggest that the findings are robust. And overall, there is little doubt that our key respondents believe the campaign has indeed improved the efficacy of local development. When asked to compare before and after the campaign, a vast majority of respondents felt that development projects under the campaign were more appropriate than before. This view moreover holds across the respondents’ party affiliation (Table 5).

The increased responsiveness documented here must be balanced by a recognition that the challenges of institution-building remain significant. Though the campaign did by and large succeed in creating a nested structure of participation in decision making, it appears to have had less success in creating efficient mechanisms of implementation. A number of critics have pointed out that panchayats often had difficulty in spending their money (Chathukulam & John, 2002; Kannan, 2000) and even the campaign’s supporters acknowledge that the degree of actual integration of projects was disappointing with plans tending to reflect ward or sectoral demands rather than a strategic vision (Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2002). Our survey data also point to problems in the functioning of beneficiary committees. In most panchayats, beneficiary committees were elected to execute projects and break the notorious nexus between contractors and corrupt officials and politicians. We have already seen that the constitution of these committees was generally felt to have been democratic. But our respondents were much less sanguine about the efficacy of the committees. When asked whether beneficiary committees increased or slowed the pace of implementation, the responses were equally divided. Similarly, the respondents were evenly split as to whether or not beneficiary committees reduced the costs of implementation. Our data do not speak directly to what may have been the problem here, but some observers

Table 5. *Appropriateness of projects implemented since the start of the campaign compared to earlier projects, by party affiliation*

| Party affiliation | Fraction (%) of respondents who said | | |
|---------------------------|--|---------------------|---|
| | Earlier projects were more appropriate | Not much difference | Projects since the start of the campaign are more appropriate |
| LDF affiliation | 1.2 | 2.5 | 96.3 |
| No party affiliation | 3.7 | 9.8 | 86.5 |
| Non-LDF party affiliation | 3.9 | 18.9 | 77.2 |

have reported that many beneficiary committees were in fact little more than fronts for contractors. Tellingly, for both questions an overwhelming majority reported that it was “hard to tell.” Bearing in mind that most of our respondents have direct experience with the campaign, we are reminded that assessing actual institutional efficiency presents significant informational and measurement problems.

8. CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIZATION

The literature on associative democracy has developed rich theoretical arguments for the role that civil society can play in improving the depth and scope of democracy (Cohen & Joel, 1992; Mahajan, 1999). At the most fundamental level, the argument boils down to creating the spaces in which associational autonomy can flourish and can shape public choices. Such spaces must be both differentiated from state control and from primary social structures. And they must also be linked to public authority. This is indeed the double meaning of what Avritzer (2002) has called “participatory publics.” We have already examined the extent to which inputs that emerge from civil society are translated into policy outputs. In this final section, we turn to the question of associational autonomy. To what extent has the campaign increased the space within which previously marginalized or excluded groups can meaningfully partake in public life?

One of the more intriguing claims made in favor of participatory governance is that it has positive spillover effects for civic engagement. Because more participatory structures make it easier for civil society to have an impact on public affairs, civil society actors face fewer

costs and have greater incentives to organize. This crowding-in effect has for example been documented in the case of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (Brazil), which has witnessed a significant increase in associational activity since the inception of participatory governance (Baiocchi, 2003). In order to assess what impact the campaign has had on civil society, we asked our respondents to evaluate the level of activity of different civil society sectors before and after the campaign. Their responses are summarized in Table 6.

It is clear from these responses that there is a widespread perception that associational life has increased during the period of the campaign. Of course, we have to be careful about attributing these trends to the campaign itself since it is not possible here to control for other factors at work. Yet when we look at these results more carefully, the distribution of associational activity appears to match the campaign’s goal of expanding non-traditional vehicles of participation. Thus, while the civil society organizations that have historically played the most active role in Kerala—labor unions, political parties, and political party-affiliated mass organizations—have remained active, the highest levels of activity come from religious organizations and women’s organizations, which traditionally have not been as central to political life in Kerala as unions and parties. The increase in activity of women’s organizations would appear to be directly tied to sustained efforts by the SPB to encourage women’s involvement in the campaign. The campaign’s publicity and policies have specifically targeted women with special fund allocations, training programs, and mobilizational efforts. The KSSP and women’s groups were particularly active in forming small Neighborhood Groups as a way for women to deliberate and organize

Table 6. *Impact of the campaign on associational activity*

| Type of association | Fraction of respondents who said levels of activity are | | | | |
|--|---|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------|
| | Much lower | Somewhat lower | About the same | Somewhat higher | Much higher |
| Religious organizations | 2.5 | 19.8 | 18.6 | 10.6 | 48.5 |
| Labor unions and farmers’ associations | 2.3 | 20.6 | 31.3 | 12.5 | 33.3 |
| Mass-based development organizations | 1.7 | 16.9 | 35.1 | 17.8 | 28.5 |
| Party-affiliated women’s/youth organizations | 2.5 | 17.9 | 34.0 | 14.1 | 31.6 |
| Women’s organizations | 1.1 | 8.0 | 13.9 | 29.1 | 48.0 |
| Secular cultural associations | 0.6 | 8.6 | 26.0 | 24.0 | 40.8 |
| Political parties | 2.9 | 16.1 | 31.5 | 14.6 | 34.9 |

in preparation for Gram Sabhas. A number of local studies have explicitly tied the rapid rise in self-help groups to the matching funds made available by the campaign (John & Chathukulam, 2002; Manjula, 2000; Seema & Mukherjee, 2000). Registration data we collected from panchayats show a threefold increase in the number of self-help groups during the campaign.

The increased activity of religious organizations is more difficult to interpret. On the one hand it may be entirely exogenous, tied to organizing efforts of the Sangh Parivar, the alliance of Hindu nationalist organizations that have markedly stepped up their activities in Kerala in the past decade. On the other hand, when one considers that Kerala has a high density of NGOs tied to the Christian, Muslim, and Hindu communities, and that these organizations have a long track record of civic-minded activity, it is just as plausible that the campaign provided new opportunities for these groups to mobilize.

An increase in associational activity does not necessarily translate into an increase in actual influence. To assess the extent to which civil society has actually acquired greater influence in public affairs at the local level, we asked respondents the extent to which ordinary citizens “were more likely to raise questions and demand answers from elected representatives and government officials” with respect to a number of basic governance functions. The responses reported in Table 7 paint a clear picture of increased voice. In fact, only a very small fraction of respondents felt there had been no increase in citizen voice. If we examine the responses by respondent category, it becomes clear that with the exception of the *opposition branch heads*, all other categories see a signifi-

cant increase in voice. Whereas government officials and elected politicians had different views about the impact of the campaign on accountability (reported earlier) their opinion of increase in voice is almost identical and especially true of panchayat secretaries and panchayat members. Also noteworthy is that representatives of SC/ST organizations and women’s organizations also perceived a high increase in voice.

We also asked a series of questions about how the campaign had affected women and lower caste and minority communities’ ability to engage the public arena, including separate questions about voice (willingness to make demands) and empowerment. As shown in Table 8a, respondents detected a marked increase in women’s voice. When we control for the gender of the respondent, we find that women are slightly more likely than men to detect an increase. The lower score for lower castes (Table 8b) may simply be a result of their uneven distribution across panchayats.

The question on empowerment was as follows: “In your opinion, compared to before the campaign, did the campaign and its activities help bring women [or SC/STs and Minority Communities] more into public arena and empower them in raising development issues?” The responses with respect to women are summarized in Table 9a. Note that the response “Drastic changes” is a translation of “*valiathothil*” in Malayalam that is more literally translated as “in a big measure.” Fully two thirds of the respondents felt that there had been “drastic change,” with the representative of women’s organizations choosing this response 82.1% of the time. Only a handful of respondents felt that there had been no change. The respondents did not feel that the campaign empowered SC/

Table 7. *Compared to before the campaign are ordinary people in the panchayat more likely today to raise questions and demand responses from elected representatives and government officials...*

| | Fraction of respondents who said | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| | Less likely | No change | More likely | Much more likely |
| ...if basic services such as primary health care, education, or drinking water are not adequately provided? | 1.2 | 2.1 | 63.7 | 32.9 |
| ...if basic infrastructure such as roads or irrigation facilities were not adequately provided or maintained? | 1.7 | 2.0 | 59.1 | 37.2 |
| ... if they felt that the list of beneficiaries selected for various schemes was inappropriate? | 2.5 | 5.1 | 65.1 | 27.3 |
| ... if they suspected corruption or misuse of public funds in the implementation of projects? | 2.7 | 8.7 | 64.3 | 24.2 |

Table 8a. *Are women in the panchayat more likely today to voice their needs and demand responses from elected representatives and government officials?*

| Respondent type | Fraction of respondents (by type) who said | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|------------------|
| | Much less likely | Somewhat less likely | No real change | Somewhat more likely | Much more likely |
| All respondents | 0.7 | 0.1 | 2.9 | 56.2 | 40.1 |
| Representatives of women's groups | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 41.5 | 58.5 |
| Female respondents (all categories) | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.2 | 57.1 | 41.8 |

Table 8b. *Are members of SC/ST or minority communities in the panchayat more likely today to voice their needs and demand responses from elected representatives and government officials?*

| Respondent type | Fraction of respondents (by type) who said | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|------------------|
| | Much less likely | Somewhat less likely | No real change | Somewhat more likely | Much more likely |
| All respondents | 0.7 | 0.6 | 7.5 | 71.6 | 19.6 |
| Representatives of SC/ST groups | 0.0 | 0.0 | 8.1 | 69.4 | 22.6 |

Table 9a. *Has the campaign helped to bring women into the public arena and empower them to raise developmental issues concerning women?*

| Respondent type | Fraction of respondents (by type) who said | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|---------------|----------------|
| | No real change | Slight change | Drastic change |
| All respondents | 0.5 | 32.2 | 66.5 |
| Representatives of women's groups | 0.0 | 17.9 | 82.1 |
| Female respondents (all categories) | 0.0 | 32.5 | 65.7 |

Table 9b. *Has the campaign helped to bring members of the SC/ST and minority communities into the public arena and empower them to raise developmental issues more effectively?*

| Respondent type | Fraction of respondents (by type) who said | | |
|---------------------------------|--|---------------|----------------|
| | No real change | Slight change | Drastic change |
| All respondents | 3.8 | 48.1 | 46.4 |
| Representatives of SC/ST groups | 6.4 | 46.0 | 46.0 |

STs and Minorities as much as it did women, but nonetheless 46.4% found the changes to be "drastic" (Table 9b).

9. CONCLUSION

In both scale and design, the decentralization reforms that were introduced in Kerala in 1996 represent an ambitious effort to build local democracy. The impact of the reforms carries important lessons for our understanding of decentralization, and even more importantly of democratic deepening. The research reported here aimed to provide broad and robust mea-

asures of the campaign's effect by collecting data directly from a sample of 72 panchayats and interviews with 858 key respondents.

Our most important finding can be simply stated: the campaign has created structures of participatory governance where none existed before. The simple fact that local governments in Kerala now have functions and resources they did not have in the recent past represents a significant transformation. Until the passage of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, local government in India (with a few notable exceptions) was little more than an empty institutional shell serving primarily as an extension of the planning and bureaucratic

powers of states. Whatever authority local governments had was generally monopolized by local elites. Because of its history of land reform and social movements, Kerala departed somewhat from this pattern of local elite dominance, but panchayats have nonetheless historically been very weak and developmentally ineffective. That the campaign has irreversibly changed the importance of local government in Kerala is beyond doubt. Not only have resources been devolved—and we know this both from official sources, from direct data collected from our sample panchayats and from the almost unanimous opinions of our respondents—but new institutions have been built, new processes of local decision making have been created and new channels of participation have been opened up. In sum, new loci of governance and new spaces of citizenship now mark Kerala's political and development landscape. One of the most respected and skeptical commentators on the campaign, Kannan, has maybe offered one of the most succinct assessments: the campaign has not only created a “public platform for a vigilant civil society,” but has also ensured an “enabling environment for development” (Kannan & Pillai, 2004, p. 39).

If the evidence presented here documents the formation of new institutions of governance and democracy, it also suggests that these new institutions and practices have had a significant impact on the quality, efficacy, and inclusiveness of development.

(1) Contrary to Crook and Manor's assessment that decentralized planning has little chance of success in India (1998, p. 49), all of our evidence points to the fact that the participatory planning took place in our sample panchayats. Participation figures show widespread involvement in Gram Sabhas and broad-based involvement at higher stages of decision making. All of our findings point to the fact that civil society inputs were processed through the system and significantly impacted final budgetary allocations. The composition of Task Forces in particular points to the incorporation of civil society, and as such marks a break with top-down and bureaucratic modes of decision making. There has clearly been a decline in participation over the years suggesting that the campaign may no longer be in a “mobilizational” mode, and the inclusiveness of participation decreases for women (though not for SCs) as one moves up the decision-making chain. Nonetheless, more people from a wider spectrum of society are now involved in making deci-

sions about local development than ever before. The fact that elected panchayat members and local officials have a particularly positive view of the campaign certainly reflects their positional biases, but also the fact that they now enjoy far greater responsibility and autonomy.

(2) There is also a clear evidence of the constitution of participatory publics. To the extent that Gram Sabhas and Task Forces actually do influence budgetary outcomes and that panchayats have adopted participatory inputs, not just as general demands, but as actual projects designed and proposed by democratically constituted bodies of politicians, officials, and citizens, suggests that local spheres of public opinion making (Gram Sabhas) are not just consultative, but are in fact linked to authoritative institutions. This is critical, because as in the well documented case of popular budgeting in Porto Alegre (Avritzer, 2002; Baiocchi, 2003) it marks a passage from the constitution of public spheres (the focus of Habermas' theory) to the institutionalization of participatory publics, that is “institutional formats capable of addressing at the institutional level the issues made contentious at the public level” (Avritzer, 2002, p. 7).

(3) The campaigns' participatory structures have had a significant positive impact on development performance. This finding must be qualified because of the nature of our sample, local political elites. There are however a number of factors that allow us to be fairly confident that this is a robust finding. First, the positive response of our sample was true across a wide range of questions, even as respondents expressed some doubt about certain aspects of the campaign. For example, while an overwhelming majority felt that the campaign produced projects that were more appropriate than in the past, many expressed skepticism about the efficacy of beneficiary committees. Our respondents also clearly differentiated between areas of development, giving panchayats high marks for roads, housing for the poor and child services, but low marks in promoting economic development. Second, opinions varied across respondent categories, but were generally consistent. Thus, even the group that was mostly likely to be critical—local opposition politicians—and indeed consistently provided the least positive judgments, nonetheless gave the campaign high marks overall. Both members of and representatives of subordinate groups generally shared the opinions of the larger sample.

(4) The campaign had demonstrably positive effects on social inclusion. Our data on participation leave no doubt that SCs and women have established a new presence in the local public sphere. These groups represented a high proportion of Gram Sabha participants, and were active in Development Seminars and Task Forces. Also, a vast majority of our respondents—including women and SCs—felt that disadvantaged groups had benefited from the campaign. This was true both in material terms and with respect to growing voice and empowerment.

This brings us to a final question which is not directly addressed in this study, but calls for comment. To what extent are the developments documented in this study sustainable? To what extent has local democratic government been institutionalized, and more specifically to what extent has participatory planning translated into greater capacity for local governance? This study focused on the launching of decentralization in Kerala, a period of four years during which the CPI(M)-led LDF was in power. A reform of governance structures of this magnitude requires significant political initiative and the campaign was by all accounts made possible by a fortuitous alignment of political and social forces, including a sustained mobilizational effort. In their infancy, all institutions depend on a delicate equilibrium of political forces. The history of decentralization in India (as well as in Kerala) is a history of reversals. A change of government has often seen the dismantling of decentralization initiatives.

As the declining levels of participation in Gram Sabhas indicate, the campaign has moved beyond its mobilizational phase and now depends more on the commitment of active citizens, local politicians, and local officials. The reform stage of breaking with the past through a strategy of large-scale mobilization must now give way to the more incremental process of systems consolidation, and most notably of building local governance capacity, a stage that presents unique political and institutional challenges of its own. One of our findings—that beneficiary committees have not been effective—underscores the difficulty of institutionalizing local governance. But the likelihood of routinizing participatory democratic practices—which we would argue is a necessary first step in any process of democratic deepening—has been increased by two key experiential legacies of the campaign. First, the procedural and substantive achievements documented here

have significantly increased the legitimacy of democratic local government and widened the political space for local politicians and civil society. Citizens now expect more of local government, and such expectations are what sustains democratic practices. Second, the campaign has had a significant experiential impact on a wide range of actors. It has created a new constituency of over 14,000 elected local representatives (39% of whom are women) and thousands of local government officials who have a vested interest in the new institutions, and it has given thousands of ordinary citizens a direct taste of local development planning.

The Congress-led UDF government that came to power in 2001 showed far less enthusiasm for decentralization than its predecessor. Although the Congress government officially embraced the new institutions and did not alter any of the legislative architecture of the campaign (leading Chathukulam & John (2002) to argue that its position is in fact a continuation of the LDF's policies) it did fully downshift the campaign's mobilizational mode. The mass training programs, voluntary technical committees and the movement-like activism of the State Planning Board all come to an end. Kerala's worsening fiscal crisis has also slowed the flow (if not the proportion) of revenues downwards. The overwhelming electoral victory of the LDF in local government elections in 2005 and its return to power at the state level in May 2006 may yet infuse the process of local government democratization with a new political vitality. In any event, the future of local democratic government in Kerala remains critically dependent on shifting political configurations. These political vicissitudes (which have been the historical norm in Kerala) notwithstanding, the campaign has produced valuable lessons and experiences, and has quite possibly triggered and amplified societal developments that are conducive to democratic deepening. The production of local development plans, the discussion and the design of thousands of projects, and the resulting innovation have injected new ideas, new energy, and new discourses into local development. Gram Sabhas, and maybe most significantly Task Forces, have drawn thousands of citizens directly into the process of problem-solving and even concrete decision making, opening up new spaces for the deliberative logic of civil society. If politics are as much about practices as they are about institutions, then these experiences will surely have a lasting impact.

NOTES

1. The full results of the research were first presented in a report submitted to the Ford Foundation (Chaudhuri, Harilal, & Heller, 2004).
2. A similar point can also be made for Brazil and South Africa, where recent reforms have created a wide range of local democratic opportunities.
3. See in particular Mahajan (1996, 1999) and Jayal (2001).
4. For an overview, see Chaudhuri (2006). John and Chathukulam argue that before the constitutional amendments Kerala “was behind most states in India in the implementation of Panchayat Raj” (2002).
5. Exceptions of course abound. Decentralization in West Bengal has provided for significant local decision making, though not integrated planning as such. The impact of decentralization in 1980s in Karnataka has been well documented by Crook and Manor (1998), though many of the reforms were subsequently rolled back. More recently, Madhya Pradesh has made important strides, both by devolving new powers to Gram Sabhas and through the rise of a new educated middle class of intermediaries that have effectively broken the traditional brokering monopoly of local elites (Krishna, 2002). In the aggregate, the insignificance of local government in India is readily summarized: the Report of the Eleventh Finance Commission found that during 1995–98 the average annual per capita expenditure at the Gram Panchayat level in India was a paltry Rs. 69 per capita (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 186).
6. As cited by V.K. Ramachandran at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, Trivandrum, May 27, 2000.
7. For the most comprehensive overview of the Campaign’s origins and design, see Thomas Isaac and Franke (2002). Most of the campaign’s official documents are unusual in the candor and directness with which they address existing problems of development and democracy. The two volumes of the *Committee on Decentralization of Powers* report is not only a testament to the care and detail with which legal and regulatory infrastructure of the campaign was developed, but also stands as a first rate analysis and indictment of top-down bureaucratic governance.
8. These figures are provided by the SPB. Media reports and the authors’ own experience leave little doubt as to the vast scale of the initiative.
9. With its 50,000 strong membership recruited predominantly from the white-collar professions of civil servants and school teachers, the KSSP has an organized presence in a majority of villages in Kerala and is by far the most active and influential non-party affiliated, secular organization in the state.
10. These included comprehensive participatory planning exercises in selected panchayats, experiments in water shed management, the development of new participatory techniques of research and planning, including local resources mapping, and a range of local environmental projects. Many of these have been documented by the Centre for Development Studies’ Kerala Research Programme for Local Level Development. See <http://krpcds.org/>.
11. The total is lower than the full sample because in some panchayats some of the categories were missing (e.g., a caste association representative), some respondents could not be located and some respondents had dual identities (e.g., panchayat president and union leader).
12. In a study of six states, Jha found that in 1999–2000, the average size of the Gram Panchayat budget in Kerala was Rs. 8,900,000. The next highest of any state was Rs. 200,000 (2002, p. 2614).
13. Beasley, Pande, and Rao (2004) using household survey data from the four south Indian states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala find that individuals were three times more likely to attend Gram Sabhas in Kerala.
14. Fung and Wright (2003) address this problem directly in developing their model of “empowered participatory governance.”
15. In the case of Kerala, reliable data on pre-campaign local expenditures are available only at the district level.
16. One particularly interesting result is how government officials evaluated improvement in areas that require a high degree of technical capacity. Much of the criticism of the campaign concerned the lack of technical know-how at the local level and the campaign’s reliance on voluntary technical experts. In two such areas—roads and irrigation—over 80% of line department officials felt that things had actually improved. Since both these sectors were previously to a large extent controlled by the Public Works Department, a

department notorious throughout India for high (and organized) leakage, this represents an improvement from a possibly very low baseline.

17. Anganwadis in Kerala provide not only childcare, but also after school services. Since participation of women in the workforce increases as one moves down the occupational and caste ladder, childcare is a subsidy for the working poor. Many economists have argued that local roads have a poverty-alleviation impact. This point is open to debate, but in Kerala, where the rural road infrastructure is already highly developed, it has been argued that new roads primarily benefit marginalized communities.

18. Alsop, Krishna, and Sjoblom (2000) present data from Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan that suggest that caste and wealth are not as decisive in shaping participation patterns as generally assumed. Chaudhuri and Heller (2003) argue that categorical inequalities have a certain plastic quality, lending them to surprisingly rapid transformation under the right social and institutional circumstances.

19. Note that this is attendance at only one of three or four annual Gram Sabhas meaning that the percentage of individuals who attended a single Gram Sabha in a given year is even higher. Comparisons are by definition problematic, but this represents the highest level of participation in any Indian state (World Bank, 2000) and compares favorably with the city of Porto Alegre and the province of Rio Grande du Sul in Brazil, the most celebrated and carefully documented case of direct participation in budgeting (Baiocchi, 2003).

20. Scheduled caste is the official term for “untouchables” and Scheduled tribe for designated tribal groups. The preferred terminology for these groups is now respectively Dalits and Adivasis, but we use SC/ST because this is how official data are reported.

21. Bardhan and Mookherjee report that while SCs and Muslims are evenly represented in West Bengal, women’s attendance rate was only 9% (2004, p. 10).

22. The specific question was: “Have the felt needs of the community, as expressed in the Gram Sabhas, been reflected in the plans submitted by the panchayat since the beginning of the campaign?”

23. Similarly, in Porto Alegre the “popular budget” that emerges from neighborhood assemblies has no legal standing. Yet for 13 consecutive years it has been adopted by the city council.

24. Inverting James Scott’s weapons of the weak, Scheper-Hughes has argued that footdragging, lies and false compliance are the weapons with which the privileged can subvert demands from below (1992, p. 514).

25. In their detailed study of decentralization in Karnataka, Crook and Manor report that local politicians were quite open in explaining how they prevented SCs from exerting influence and even obtaining funds earmarked for SCs (1998, p. 39).

26. The *Committee on the Decentralisation of Powers*—which played a key role in developing the campaign’s institutional structure—reports that an informal opinion survey among panchayat presidents before the campaign found that 40% of funds spent on road construction (an expenditure preferred for its skimming returns) “do not go into the work for various reasons” (GOK, 1997, p. 46).

27. If government officials have limited sway over project selection, they clearly can still impact implementation. John and Chathukulam report that government engineers still exert significant power in beneficiary committees charged with implementation (2002, p. 1942).

28. In a comparative study of decentralization in four south Indian states, Beasley *et al.* (2004) also found that there was a lower incidence of ward-based targeting in Kerala than in other states.

29. The *Committee on Decentralisation of Powers* was pointed in its condemnation of the widespread manipulation of beneficiary committees noting that it was “an insult to the literate and politically aware public of the State” (GOK, 1997, p. 46).

30. Harilal and George (2000) have also shown that the campaign’s required sectoral allocations maximize inclusiveness (and have a pro-poor bias) and minimize the risk of patronage.

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