



CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING: A CASE STUDY OF KERALA GOVERNMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper critically analyses the development and performance of participatory urban planning in Kerala in India, a state that has gained enormous recognition as being progressive in decentralized governance. The study is set in the background of the post-73 rd and 74 th Constitutional Amendment and examines the way Kerala has institutionalized the citizen participation process in the state by initiating projects like People Planning Campaign (PPC), Kudumbashree Mission and Sutharyakeralam e-governance platform. The study deploys the qualitative case study methodology to investigate the views of stakeholders and four major participatory initiatives and the contribution of the community mobilization, women-led planning, and digital platforms in the improvement of civic engagement. The results indicate that community ownership, inclusiveness and integration of technology play a key role in sustainable and responsible governance. Nonetheless, issues like caste-based exclusion, digital illiteracy, elite capture, and low administrative capacity are still there. Basing on the Ladder of Participation by Arnstein and the international models of comparison, the paper provides policy recommendations that can be implemented to overcome these shortcomings and enhance the Kerala model as a model that could be replicated in other Indian states and Global South.

Keywords: Citizen Participation, Urban Planning, E-Governance, Kudumbashree, Participatory Planning, Kerala Model

INTRODUCTION

Democratization of planning processes has more and more been a pillar of equitable and sustainable development, especially within the context of the rapidly urbanizing societies. The demand of inclusive governance and participatory planning has been increasing in the Global South as an answer to the top-down development models that tend to alienate the voices of marginalization. Kerala is a leading example in institutionalising participatory governance



within India, given its rich history of social reform, good literacy levels and the active participation of the civil society.

The model of participatory planning in Kerala changed a lot after the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment was implemented in the early 90s that made it mandatory to decentralize the governance and planning to local self-government institutions (LSGIs). Where most of the Indian states were grappling with the implementation of such mandates, Kerala took them up in its own unique way in the form of the landmark People Planning Campaign (PPC) that started in 1996. The PPC sought to devolve up to 35-40 percent of the development budget of the state to local organizations and promoted citizen participation in needs identification, plan formulation and monitoring. This transition transformed the role of a citizen into active co-creators of development as opposed to being a passive recipient of development.

Research Objective

- To look at the rules and organisations in Kerala that allow people to be a part of planning cities.
- To find out how well community-based organisations like Kudumbashree can change strategies for building cities.
- To find out how people feel about and are happy with the decisions they make about urban growth.
- To find the main issues and challenges that make it hard for people to be involved in city government.
- To use Kerala as an example to suggest changes to policies that will make inclusive planning better in other Indian states.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Asatryan et al. (2017) given the detailed picture of the role of citizens in the urban planning and has mentioned the theory behind the engagement, the process of engagement and the practices of various countries across the world. They stressed the importance of effective political will and existence of enabling legislative frameworks in ensuring meaningful public participation. The authors further observed that in most urban situations, participation is more symbolic than substantive especially when stakeholder involvement is considered as a procedural formality as opposed to a democratic requirement.

Baxi and Shah (2017) identified that, even though the current constitution contains the provisions of participatory governance, the community participation in practice was uncommon and was mostly limited to the will of local governments. Theirs was to show that socio-economic disparity, unawareness, and technical language in the planning process tended to leave the disadvantaged groups out of the cycle of making significant contributions to urban decision-making.

Bianchi (2019) evaluated how meaningful public participation in the modern development of urban areas is declining. The paper claimed that neoliberal policy movements and privatization of the urban domains had marginalized the voice of the community in the name of market-oriented development. Bianchi argued that participatory processes were becoming more and

more instruments to validate pre-determined plans, instead of being vehicles of authentic consultations and co-making.

Chado (2018) analysed the peculiarities of the problem of encouraging citizens to participate in the heritage cities where the opposing interests of conservation-related activities and urban growth often appeared. The research found out that local governments lacked that ability to involve communities in effective heritage preservation plans and this resulted in the resistance of the people, loss of cultural identity and failure to implement the policies.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is based on the qualitative approach of case study research design to understand the character and success of citizen involvement in urban planning in Kerala. One hundred and thirty stakeholders were purposively chosen to be interviewed and they included local residents, civic officials, municipal planners, elected representatives, NGO workers, and urban activists. Collection of data was conducted between March and May 2010 and both structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted so as to garner different views regarding the levels of awareness, involvement, satisfaction, and issues surrounding participatory governance. The four initiatives covered during the interviews included the Alappuzha Canal Rejuvenation Project, the contribution of Kudumbashree to housing in cities, the Vennala Sewage Treatment Plant, and the Sutharyakeralam e-Governance platform and they represented various aspects of participation. The use of open-ended questions enabled the development of descriptive accounts and the emergence of common themes, whereas the field observation and informal conversations were utilized to prove the triangulation of data. Using this method allowed the study to examine the depth and diversity of civic participation among different social groups as well as evaluate the institutional, political, and cultural issues that affect participatory planning in Kerala.

Research Hypothesis

- **H₁:** Kerala's town planning processes work much better when people are involved.
- **H₀ (Null Hypothesis):** In Kerala, getting people involved in urban planning does not make it work better.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of citizen participation in urban planning has a deep theoretical explanation that entails the intensity of participation as well as the process through which participation is either facilitated or inhibited. This paper will rely on well-known conceptual frameworks of participation and decentralization, and will put the experience of Kerala into the international and national perspective. The following framework represents the most important theories and legal provisions that shape the analysis.

3.1. Conceptualizing Participation: Arnstein's Ladder

The current research paper is based on the Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969) as a theoretical framework. The model developed by Arnstein measures citizen participation in eight rungs, where the three general categories include non-participation (manipulation, therapy), tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), and citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). This ladder is especially valuable in the measurement of the extent of real power that the citizens have in the urban planning processes. Placing different participatory mechanisms in this spectrum, the study assesses the relevance of citizen participation in Kerala as being symbolic or true transformation.

3.2. Global Participatory Planning Models

The research also accesses international examples of participatory planning that have been in use in other countries including Brazil (e.g., participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre), South Africa (community-based urban redevelopment) and the Philippines (barangay-level planning). The similarity in these models is the focus on decentralization, grass root mobilization, and empowerment by inclusion in decision making. They help to put Kerala initiatives in a comparative context and point to common problems as well as new practices that make the Kerala model interesting in the Global South.

3.3. Constitutional and Legal Framework in India

An important legal source of decentralized urban governance in India is the 74 th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. It required the establishment of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), and also made provision of Ward Committees, Metropolitan Planning Committees and functional devolution. The Amendment aimed at entrenching the participatory governance by putting planning near to people and ensuring frequent consultations with citizens. But the implementation has differed in different states. Kerala is unique in its active utilization of these provisions in the form of the People Planning Campaign (PPC) that has institutionalized the participation of citizens not as a consultation process.

4. CASE STUDIES

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a) Alappuzha Canal Rejuvenation

Alappuzha Canal Rejuvenation Project is a model project of people-centred urban environmental management in Kerala. Alappuzha once referred to as the Venice of the East, boasted of a complex system of canals that had been ruined by pollution, encroachment, and

neglect. The rejuvenation project was to rehabilitate 14 major canals which was a mix of modern engineering and active citizen participation. Institutions like the IIT Bombay and Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) helped in technological cooperation whereas there were many NGOs which helped in local participation. The technologies involved in the project were environmentally friendly and included phytoremediation and Decentralized Wastewater Treatment Systems (DEWATS) that were used to clean and sustainably maintain the canals. One of the most notable was the campaign called Thodu Odayalla (which translated into The Canal is Not a Drain) that involved school children, youth volunteers, and residents, in taking charge of canal preservation. The project did not only enhance water quality and aesthetic value of the city but also created a sense of civic pride and environmental responsibility among the citizens.

b) Kudumbashree and Urban Housing

Kudumbashree Mission, which is among the largest women empowerment initiatives in India, is very instrumental in urban housing and poverty eradication in Kerala. Kudumbashree has also facilitated the process of developing bottom-up housing action plans that are based on community needs through its network of all-women Neighborhood Groups (NHGs), Area Development Societies (ADS), and Community Development Societies (CDS). These organizations play a direct role of selecting the beneficiaries of housing, layout planning and construction quality control. Participatory process makes sure that the marginalized voices are included especially those of the women in the decision making of plans. In addition, the program has also encouraged micro-entrepreneurship as the members of Kudumbashree have been employed in construction trades and chains. Along with the successes, the initiative has numerous challenges, such as continued occurrence of caste-based exclusions and excessive dependence on microcredit mechanisms which in some cases impose debt on the poor households. However, Kudumbashree has greatly contributed to participatory governance and gender inclusive growth within the urban segments of Kerala.

c) Vennala Sewage Treatment Plant

Vennala Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) in Kochi, which was realized as part of the Integrated Urban Regeneration and Water Transport System (IURWTS), is a good example of how infrastructure projects can be implemented in an effective way of involving the people. The project has gone through a lot of Social Impact Assessments (SIAs), and several rounds of public hearings were held before the process of land acquisition was concluded. Such consultations provided the concerned residents with a platform to air their grievances, propose changes, and be aware of the long-term environment impacts of the project. The inputs of citizens resulted in modifications to the design of the plant and the addition of green buffers to eliminate odors and enhance aesthetic appeal. This responsiveness improved the level of public acceptability and minimized opposition, which became a model of participatory infrastructure planning. The Vennala case demonstrates how the social accountability mechanisms can be integrated in technical projects in order to guarantee the transparency, trust-building, and sustainability.



d) Sutharyakeralam E-Governance

Sutharyakeralam is the flagship digital governance system of Kerala which aims to increase transparency, responsiveness, and citizen-government interaction. The platform was created to simplify the process of grievance redressal as it enables citizens to lodge complaints, monitor the progress of the same and receive real-time access to public services through web and mobile applications. It unifies different departments and local organizations into a centralized system, which makes the communication between agencies and their prompt responses much quicker. The citizens are also able to rate services and leave comments which create a culture of continuous improvement. Nonetheless, the platform presents a major challenge, especially in the rural and poor urban regions, where digital literacy and the internet connection is a problem. Also, the bureaucratic inertia and delays in redressal at times curb the success of the initiative. Nonetheless, Sutharyakeralam is a significant step in the process of digital democratization of governance, which establishes new spaces of citizen engagement in urban planning and service provision.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter entails an in-depth analysis of case studies and participatory planning models of choice in an attempt to discern the role of community collaboration, strategies of governance as well as, the role citizens play in urban development. This chapter draws on a comparison of various initiatives and finds common themes and varying goals, approaches, and problems through a comparison of Alappuzha Canal Rejuvenation, Kudumbashree, and Urban Housing. It is also probing into a collaborative governance system, use of technology in relation to engagement as well as strategies that should be used to promote inclusive participation in urban planning processes.

a) Analysis of Case Studies: Identifying Common Themes and Divergences

In this part, the comparison is drawn between three projects Alappuzha Canal Rejuvenation, Kudumbashree, and Urban Housing. The Alappuzha project deals not only with the improvement of infrastructure and community involvement in the process of environmental rehabilitation. Kudumbashree is one such program that works with women and focuses more on poverty alleviation and empowerment in Kerala. Urban Housing deals with supply of affordable housing to the urban low-income earners. Whereas Alappuzha focuses on upliftment of the environment Kudumbashree gears towards social transformation and the Urban Housing towards infrastructure of the housing. They satisfy various groups of people and have got their special modalities and objectives.

b) Revitalizing the Canals of Alappuzha through Community Collaboration

Alappuzha Canal Rejuvenation is focused more on the improvement of water quality and ecological condition to improve urban living environment by involving a large portion of the community. Kudumbashree economically and socially powers women through grass-roots level collectives. Urban housing provides affordable housing to urban poverty. These efforts differ in magnitude and applicability, Alappuzha affects the entire community, Kudumbashree focuses on females, and Urban Housing proposes to low-income groups living in cities. Vennala Sewage Treatment Plant closely focuses on the environmental health and the wellbeing

of the communities by adopting the theme of a healthy future and clean water. Through digitization on the Sutharyakeralam E-Governance Initiative, information transactions are transparent and accountable, which makes the governance to be more efficient and the people to trust in the government using the likes of e-Office and awards to governance.

c) Methods for Involving the Community

Participatory urban planning is strengthened through public meetings, surveys, and digital platforms, allowing communities to voice opinions and influence decisions. Technological tools such as online forums, social media, and platforms like Decidim help visualize plans and encourage interaction, especially among underrepresented populations.

d) Collaborative Models for Governance

Effective urban planning thrives on collaboration among government bodies, private entities, and civil society. Initiatives like the World Bank's Cities Alliance exemplify this model. Participatory budgeting, planning workshops, and charrettes ensure inclusivity in decision-making. A simple linear model illustrates that citizen participation increases with the number of engagement methods and level of inclusivity, reinforcing the importance of inclusive planning.

e) Challenges and Limitations

Various barriers hinder effective citizen participation. Institutional issues include weak transparency, limited resources, untrained facilitators, and corruption. Social and cultural factors like lack of civic education, language barriers, and digital inequality reduce engagement. Political obstacles, disinformation, and unresponsive governance also diminish trust. The participatory process is often expensive, inefficient, and time-consuming, making it difficult for administrators to implement effectively. Additionally, public apathy and language diversity can further lower involvement, especially in multicultural settings.

f) Opportunities for Enhancement: Strategies for Improving Citizen Participation

Governments can enhance participation by leveraging technology, designing user-friendly platforms, and empowering citizens through participatory tools like budgeting and advisory committees. Frequent communication via newsletters, polls, and community seminars builds trust and keeps citizens informed. Online meetings and inclusive digital platforms ensure wider accessibility. Local governments should begin with small, manageable steps like newsletters or mobile updates to steadily build stronger civic engagement.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The model of participatory urban planning in Kerala provides strong evidence of how democratic decentralization can be efficiently implemented in order to foster equity, accountability, and sustainability. The state has developed institutional means by which citizens may directly participate in the process of governance through People Planning Campaign, Kudumbashree, and online platforms such as Sutharyakeralam. Such programs have enabled communities (with special consideration to women), enhanced service delivery in the society

and enhanced civic trust. Nevertheless, its successes notwithstanding, there are still major issues to be addressed such as structural inequalities, shortage of administrative capacity and digital exclusion. These problems are necessary to address not only to maintain the development of Kerala but also to set its model as a model that can be replicated in other Indian states and other developing areas in the world.

Policy Recommendations

- Address structural inequalities by ensuring active inclusion of marginalized groups (e.g., Dalits, Adivasis, women, and urban poor) in participatory platforms through representation quotas and targeted outreach.
- Build capacity of facilitators and civic officials by organizing regular training on participatory methods, inclusive facilitation, conflict resolution, and urban governance tools.
- Improve digital access and inclusivity through expansion of internet infrastructure, mobile-friendly platforms, multilingual interfaces, and community-level digital literacy campaigns.
- Institutionalize participatory budgeting at the municipal and ward levels to enable citizens to directly influence the allocation of public funds based on local priorities.
- Establish citizen advisory panels composed of diverse stakeholders to provide ongoing inputs to urban planning processes and enhance deliberative decision-making.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms by linking citizen feedback from platforms like Sutharyakeralam to real-time administrative responses and measurable performance indicators

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