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Social and Solidarity Economy Experiment*

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**Taking Solidarity Seriously:
Analyzing *Kudumbashree* as a Women's Social and Solidarity Economy Experiment**

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This paper analyzes *Kudumbashree*, a unique social initiative in the Indian state of Kerala composed of nearly 4 million women below the poverty line, which is undertaking an important social and solidarity economy experiment. While Kerala has long been the highest ranked Indian state in terms of human development and has received international acclaim for its achievements, it still exhibits significant gender inequality and multiple marginalizations (along the lines of caste, ethnicity, etc.) in the social, political and economic realms. *Kudumbashree* was initiated by the state government fifteen years ago as a poverty eradication programme. Since that time it has developed into a unique network in which marginalized women work collectively to promote prosperity through planning and implementing programs and projects that address the root causes of their poverty. While *Kudumbashree* groups participate in a wide range of social, educational, and economic programs, as well as actively engaging in the political realm, in this paper we focus specifically on the social and solidarity economy activities that they have been engaged in. More specifically, we highlight how the creation of strong bonds of solidarity, grounded in democratic decision-making and collective action, have enabled poor women to challenge existing power imbalances and establish innovative organizations.

The Kerala Model – An Incipient Social & Solidarity Economy?

The context out of which *Kudumbashree* arises is the particular set of policies and practices that were adopted in the state of Kerala between the late 1950s and 1980s and which became known as the “Kerala development model.” The unique features that defined this model were the presence of high social development indicators over an extended period of time without a corresponding level of high economic growth (Chakraborty 2005). Among the social development indicators that are cited are infant mortality rates, life expectancies, female to male ratios and literacy rates, which in all instances far outstripped other Indian states and in some cases approached levels more common in developed nations (Dreze and Sen, 1995). In addition to raising overall social indicators, Kerala has also consistently had among the best performances with regard to narrowing the gap between the general population and marginalized groups, including women, scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST). In order to understand how *Kudumbashree* emerged out of this model in the late 1990s it is necessary to both qualify its success and to understand the political and economic factors which help to account for this qualified success.

While the basic achievements of the Kerala model are widely cited and uncontroversial, what is less well publicized is the fact that the Kerala model still featured significant differences between historically marginalized groups and the rest of Malayalee society up into the 1990s, and beyond. To account for these on-going differences, it is necessary to briefly examine the origins of the Kerala model that emerged in the wake of the formation of the new state in 1956 out of the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin and the previously British controlled territory of Malabar.

A number of social, political and economic factors are commonly cited as contributing to the emergence of the Kerala model. These include, among others: the presence of a matrilinear tradition in some elements of Malayalam society, especially among the Nair caste (Jeffrey 2004); the promotion of public education by religious organizations (across different religions and denominations) and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin dating back to the 19th century, which resulted high literacy rates among females as well as males (Devika and Thampi 2011; Jeffrey 1987); socio-religious reform movements which emerged out of processes of the commercialization of agriculture (Oommen 2009), and; peasant movements and mobilizations by the communist party that eventually resulted in land reforms (Tharakan 2008).

These various reform measures led to the emergence of relatively vibrant civil society in the new state of Kerala, but one with several distinct features. First, there was still significant social exclusion as it had been the middle sectors that had disproportionately benefitted – both economically and socially – from previous reforms. These sectors were willing to push the new state (and its alternating communist and Congress governments) for further reforms. As the beneficiaries of previous reforms, these middle sectors exhibited some degree of “public mindedness” that allowed them to support the aspirations of more marginalized sectors of society.¹ Second, the marginalized sectors had themselves made some progress under previous reforms and this facilitated their mobilization to fight for the extension of their rights and benefits. Third, even among the middle sectors of society, women, despite enjoying high rates of literacy and education still remained largely shut out of participation in the public sphere, though with notable exceptions (Devika and Thampi 2011; Oommen 2009; Tharakan 2008;).

It was in this context of broad support from both the middle sectors and marginalized groups for social reform and some broad, if not deep level of social solidarity, that the new state was able to promote a variety of social and economic policies that helped to raise social indicators in the state to the top place in the nation. However, while government policies and programs did help marginalized groups, the latter did not benefit as much as the middle sectors of society, especially the male members thereof, who were most heavily involved in formulation of the plans and who were in the best situation to take advantage of them. This was exemplified most notably, perhaps, in the case of land reforms (Tharakan 2008; Matthew 1995).

Another factor in the continuing situation of social exclusion in Kerala, albeit in the presence of generally high levels of social indicators overall, was the failure of the state to induce economic growth. In principle, such growth, especially if effectively targeted, could have played a significant role in helping to improve the situation of marginalized groups. Governments in Kerala, especially communist governments, did promote a number of economic initiatives compatible with the development of a social and solidarity economy (e.g., support for co-operatives, land redistribution programs, etc.). These efforts, however, were embedded in a larger economic system of import substitution industrialization that employed centralized planning to prioritize the development of domestic capacity (usually in the form of large family business houses) in key industrial sectors and which tended to propagate a clientelistic network of patronage that permeated the entire bureaucracy. Under these conditions, and the regular alternation in governments in the state, the promotion of alternative economic development was challenging, to say the least (Isaac and Heller 2003).

To sum up, by the early 1990s in Kerala there was a situation in which there was a well established and widely supported social development model that had produced high

¹ This is a relatively weak form of social solidarity, conforming most closely to Durkheim’s notion of organic solidarity.

social indicators, but one which still exhibited significant levels of social exclusion among historically marginalized groups, with women in these groups being particularly vulnerable. Moreover, women across all social strata continued to be largely excluded from an active role in political decision-making. On the economic front, the government had been unable to induce levels of growth capable of raising marginalized groups out of poverty. It was in this context, that the government of Kerala introduced a decentralized planning process and began to experiment with poverty eradication programs targeted at women.

Kudumbashree: A State-wide Anti-poverty Program

In 1998 the government of Kerala established a state-wide poverty eradication program which it christened Kudumbashree, a name which combined the Malayalam words for family and prosperity. The program drew its inspiration in part from two recent participatory initiatives. On the one hand, pilot projects on nutrition and urban services had been conducted in two districts in Kerala earlier in the decade, in Alappuzha (1993) and Malappuram (1994). These programs, which involved collaboration with international development agencies, employed several features and tools that would be incorporated into Kudumbashree (Pillai 2007; Rajan 2006; Kadiyala 2004). On the other hand, the government was rolling out a decentralized planning process, one designed to address the problems endemic in the previous centralized system by mobilization of masses and allowing local communities greater opportunities to determine their own priorities and to implement their own solutions (Lakshmanan 2006; Issac and Heller 2003). The new anti-poverty program was conceived from its inception as fitting into this planning program.

The ambitious goal that was initially set for Kudumbashree was to eradicate absolute poverty in the state within 10 years. To accomplish this goal, the government determined that the new initiative needed to undertake three broad tasks. First, it had to define what poverty was and identify who the poor were. The authorities recognized that multiple factors could contribute to poverty and were aware that defining poverty in terms of income did not contribute to an understand of why people were vulnerable to being poor. Drawing upon the pilot projects in Alappuzha and Malappuram, an index was developed of nine social indicators that put families at risk of being poor. On the basis of this index, surveys were undertaken state-wide to identify which families were below the poverty line (BPL), as determined by their exhibiting at least four of the nine risk indicators. The category of “destitute” was added to identify those families that exhibited seven or more of the indicators.²

Second, an organizational structure had to be established. There were three main features of this structure. First, while the name of the new initiative highlighted its goal as the “prosperity of the family”, drawing upon the pilot projects in Alappuzha and Malappuram it was decided that women would be targeted as the primary agents to be organized for promoting prosperity (Siwal 2009). Accordingly, and in line with the pilot projects, BPL women were organized into a three tiered structure composed of neighbour groups (NHGs) of about 15-40 families, area development societies (ADSs) at the ward level, and community development societies (CDSs) at the village (gram) or municipal level. The NHGs provide a

² The indicators have actually changed over time, including allowing for a distinction between rural (e.g., whether they own land), and urban areas (e.g., presence of an illiterate adult), and special criteria for being destitute. Common indicators include inadequate housing, lack of potable water and adequate sanitation, being a member of a scheduled caste/tribe, female-headed households, and the lack of a person with regular employment (Pillai 2007). Various criticisms have been raised about these indicators, including what their purpose is (e.g., indicators of being at risk for being poverty or causes of poverty), whether they should be weighted, whether they are independent, the value of specific indicators, etc. (Oommen 2008)

discursive forum for women as well as serving as the basic unit for planning³ and functioning as trust and credit societies (which fund micro and group enterprises). All of the groups are democratically run, with members from the lower level groups electing representatives to the upper levels. In addition to this social movement side of Kudumbashree, there is also a second, more administrative or bureaucratic side. As the official poverty eradication program of the state, Kudumbashree is also a government agency that has a budget and paid staff and is responsible to the Department of Local Self-Governments. As a government agency, the role of this side of Kudumbashree is to provide support, training and coordination for the social movement side. A third feature of Kudumbashree involves its formal integration into the local decentralized planning process. Through their three-tiered social movement structure, Kudumbashree groups participate in a planning process through which they develop and consolidate development plans, as discussed below (Rajan 2006; Kadiyala 2004).

Third, Kudumbashree groups are actively engaged in carrying out the programs that they propose through the local planning process. Through their three-tiered structure, BPL women take on the responsibility for identifying their own needs and developing plans to address these. Micro plans formed in the NHGs may be acted upon directly or they may be woven into mini plans in the ADSs with these, in turn, compiled into larger CDS plans. The latter are incorporated into the local planning process as the “anti-poverty plan” of the village or municipality, with one-third of the total development funds set aside for these plans. With support from the government agency side of Kudumbashree and the local government, these plans are operationalized through the Kudumbashree groups and their members (Oommen 2008; Pillai 2007).

Agency and Solidarity

One of the basic premises of Kudumbashree from the start was that the poor needed to be active agents in their own development. While they differ in their terminology, numerous studies have documented the success that Kudumbashree has had in promoting agency (autonomy, empowerment) among its members (Prakash and Chandrasekar 2012; Oommen 2008; Alkire and Cherkov 2007). More significant than the specific measures of empowerment, for our concerns, is the question of how it has been possible for Kudumbashree to generate agency, especially collective agency, in such a comprehensive fashion – at such significant rates, across so many different areas (knowledge, leadership, etc.), across such a great expanse (state-wide) and among such large numbers (nearly 4 million poor women).

One starting point in attempting to answer these questions is the recognition in recent years that exercising agency is a complex and dynamic process that entails operating in different realms and requires access to a variety of types of resources. Friedmann (1992), for example, has argued that people need access to three basic forms of resources to effectively exercise power or agency: (1) social resources such as defensible life space, surplus time, knowledge and skills, appropriate information, social organization, social networks, etc.; (2) economic resources such as instruments of work and livelihood, financial resources, training and education, etc.; (3) political resources including access to formal democratic mechanisms, civil disobedience, informal mechanisms of protest, media, etc. The different resources complement each other and can be used to exercise agency across different realms in mutually supportive ways.

³ Each NHG elects five volunteers to the following positions; President, Secretary, Infrastructure Volunteer, Community Health Volunteer and Income Activities Generation Volunteer (Siwal 2009)

Arguable, the key to Kudumbashree's success has been its ability to generate and access these types of resources in a *comprehensive* and *systematic* fashion through a dynamic relationship between its movement side and its support structures. With regard to the latter, the state has provided resources in three basic ways, as noted above, namely by promoting a three-tiered structure for the organization of poor women, by establishing a state agency specifically designed to work with the movement side of Kudumbashree and by integrating the movement into the state's decentralized planning process. With respect to social resources, the organizational and support structures have facilitated the creation of safe spaces, a regular supply of information and the formation of extensive social networks through the provision of training, organizational support and access to funds. In terms of political resources, the skills gained through involvement in the group structures can be used by women to take full advantage of the access (mediated by the state) to planning structures, as well as to engage in the formal electoral process, in public protests, lobbying efforts, etc. In the economic realm, support bodies provide training, expert advice and facilitate access to capital (through the decentralized planning process and private sector lending). (Oommen 2008; Pillai 2007)

While the state in Kerala has provided unprecedented resources for the empowerment of women, this support only facilitates agency. The actual exercise of agency required decisions and action on the part of poor women. It has been decisions on the part of poor women to come out of their homes, and to encourage their neighbours to come out of their homes, in order to discuss and act upon their situation that has been essential for empowerment. By coming together in NHGs – often at great personal cost and in opposition to the will of their husbands – women have created safe spaces, gained confidence and have learned to work together to form the organizations that allowed them to effectively utilize resources, sometimes in the face of resistance by local government bodies (Rajan 2006).

Moreover, by engaging in democratic decision-making to assess needs and develop plans aimed at promoting social justice (and not just their own group interests), and by acting collectively to implement these plans, BPL women have generated what is perhaps their greatest resource, strong and extensive bonds of solidarity of a particular type. Grounded as they are in discursive democracy and collective action for social justice, these bonds go beyond kinship relationships and mutual self-interest. They are, arguably, what is most distinctive about Kudumbashree and the basis of their ability to engage in collective agency across the social, political and economic spheres. To understand Kudumbashree, it is necessary to take these bonds of solidarity seriously, that is, to problematize their formation and how they function.⁴ In the next section, we examine specifically how these bonds of solidarity are formed and are drawn upon in the development of some key social and solidarity economy initiatives.

Kudumbashree: An Emerging Social and Solidarity Economy?

Kudumbashree has developed a variety of income and employment schemes in the form of micro and group enterprises.⁵ These range across the primary sectors (small livestock

⁴ The notion of solidarity that we are employing here is grounded in Habermasian critical theory. Unlike the Durkheimian notions of mechanical and organic solidarity (which are based upon shared lifeworld assumptions and promoting shared interests in complex societies), this understanding presupposes a commitment to discursive decision-making. Moreover, it highlights the fact that building bonds of solidarity involves shared practice (in addition to discursive decision-making).

⁵ The majority of micro-enterprises are single proprietors, but some are owned by small groups. They have an investment of between Rs. 5000-250,000 and are supposed to generate a minimum income of Rs. 1500 per member. Formal group enterprises have a minimum of 10 members and higher investment rates (Siwal 2009).

rearing programs, group agriculture), secondary sectors (garment manufacturing, food processing, etc.) and tertiary sectors (information technology, recycling, sustainable tourism, etc.). From the start these initiatives received financing through the thrift and credit associations, while recently the development of distribution channels (local markets, a home shopping network) has been actively promoted. Together, these initiatives form the basis of a complete social and solidarity economy, in which the activities in different sectors are mutually reinforcing. Such an economy, however, is at best only in its initial phase. In the final section, we offer some reflections on the prospects and conditions for its development, especially in relation to the problematic of extending bonds of solidarity. In this section, however, we focus on how solidarity has functioned in the successful development of two of Kudumbashree's largest economic initiatives, one a government employment program and the other involving group agriculture.

The MGNREGS Program

In 2005, the Indian government passed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme Act (MGNREGS), which put in place what has been hailed as the largest and most successful public investment program in India in recent times. The program provides a legal guarantee of 100 days of paid employment at minimum wage rates to adults in rural households who are willing to do unskilled manual work in public work programs.

The NREGS envisages a central role for local decision-making bodies in determining the nature of the work to be and its allocation. In India, there is a three-tier structure of local self-governance in rural India (the Panchayati Raj system). At the base of this system are the Gram Panchayat (village council) and the Grama Sabha (village assembly). Each Gram Panchayat consists of one or more villages, while a *Gram Sabha* is a body constituted by the persons on the electoral roll for a *Gram Panchayat*. It is the *Gram Panchayat* that convenes meetings of the *Gram Sabha* "to disseminate information to the people as well as to ensure that development of the village is done through participation or consent of all households." (GOI 2012: 2-3) Above the village level, there are block panchayats and district panchayats levels in every state.

With respect to the operationalization of the program, the MGNREGS Act states:

Plans and decisions regarding the nature and choice of works to be undertaken in a Fiscal Year along with the order in which each work is to be taken up, site selection, etc. are all to be made in open assemblies of the Gram Sabha (GS) and ratified by the *Gram Panchayat* (GP). Works that are inserted at Block and District levels have to be approved and assigned a priority by the GS before administrative approval can be given. The GS may accept, amend or reject them (GOI 2012: 2).

While the MGNREGS was generally well received throughout India, in Kerala there were two particular issues that needed to be addressed to ensure that it could be successfully implemented. The first of these was the low level of interest in the scheme among men, as the MGNREGS wages were only about half of the standard rate for male workers in Kerala. Second, the deeply contradictory situation of women in Kerala threatened their potential participation in the scheme. While women in Kerala have enjoyed the highest human development indicators in India, at the same time they have been largely excluded from public spaces by deeply engrained patriarchal norms. In the economic realm, this is reflected in the fact the women in Kerala rank toward the bottom of participation rates in the labour force in India (see Table 1).

Table 1: Rural Women’s Workforce Participation Rate (WPR) in India, 2009-10.

State	Women’s WPR (per thousand)
Andhra Pradesh	582
Himachal Pradesh	612
Rajasthan	425
Tamil Nadu	540
Kerala	341
All India	348

(Source: Government of India, National Sample Survey 66th round, 2009-10, p. 33)

The above issues delayed and threatened the effective implementation of the MGNREGS program in Kerala as the MGNREGS program requires local governments to generate demand for work by identifying specific local schemes and work programs. The problem was solved, however, by the participation of Kudumbashree members in the process. Because they had previously been organized in NHGs, ADSs and CDSs, the Kudumbashree groups were capable not only of actively participating in the planning process, but also of mobilizing their members to work in the program. Through these efforts, 110,000 poor women are participating in the program, most of whom have entered the formal economy for the first time. Kerala ranks first in India in terms of women’s participation in MGNREGS, with women person days constituting an amazing 93 per cent of total person days for the year 2011-12.

The decision of women to participate in the NREGS program was not an easy one for many of the women, as they frequently had to bear the wrath of their family members. There were two key factors, however, which were key in their decision to get involved, as Muraleedharan explains:

What prompted these women to come out and undertake work that they did not know, which involved a level of physical exertion that they were unfamiliar with and which ran the risk of disapprobation from their families? A commonly heard refrain was that this was work ‘for the government’, which gave it an aura of respectability that private manual work did not carry. Second was the power of the collective. (2012)

Another form of participation by Kudumbashree women provides further insight into the ability of the program engage women as such a high level. A central actor in the NREGS program is the ‘mate’ (the work supervisor). Because of the confidence in Kudumbashree, the government made an executive decision to appoint all ‘mates’ for the programme from among the Kudumbashree ADSs, making Kerala became the only state in the country with 100% women ‘mates.’ To ensure effective implementation, the Rural Development Department and Kudumbashree Mission jointly trained 120,000 women mates, whose responsibilities entailed identifying work opportunities, mobilising groups for work, preparing estimates in consultation with the overseer or engineer, supervising work, providing amenities at the worksite, preparing and submitting muster rolls, and handling emergencies. Many women would cite the presence of a mate who was identified as ‘one of us,’ as someone from their immediate neighbourhood, as a key factor in their involvement.

The central role that Kudumbashree members played in the MGNREGS has dramatically shaped the functioning of the program in Kerala, embedding it in a broader discourse of awareness of the rights of women as women, workers and citizens. Moreover, women’s participation in the planning of the MGNREGS has changed the make-up of

electoral politics. In the 2011 over 11,000 women from Kudumbashree contested the panchayat elections and of these 5,404 won. Overall in Kerala – where fifty percent of seats are reserved for women – sixty per cent of all women elected as representatives in the gram panchayats were members of Kudumbashree.

It is necessary to highlight one additional impact of the involvement of Kudumbashree in the MGNREGS. Because of the skills that their members developed in the programme, particularly as supervisors and project managers, they received offers from private sector entities to manage and execute projects. This resulted in the development of another innovation – the women’s labour collective. In various panchayats across the state, MGNREGS workers have come together in these collectives to take on agricultural work and work on homesteads and plantations. Over a thousand of these collectives are in operation, and through these women are offered work at rates roughly double of what MGNREGS offers (Muraleedharan 2012).

The Sangha Krishi (Group Agriculture) Initiative

As in many other parts of the world, in Kerala vast quantities of agricultural land have been diverted towards residential and commercial development in recent years. At the same time, a fall in agricultural prices and rising wages have made farming a largely unprofitable activity, which has led to a continuous drop off in food production in the state. It is in this context that Kerala made the decision to develop a food security strategy. Unlike standard approaches to food security, though, Kerala went beyond the question of distribution to focus on the realm of production. Most interestingly, it established as one of its key goals the incorporation of women into agricultural production. Just as members of Kudumbashree were able to organize to open up new economic spaces for women through the MGNREGS, so too they would be able to respond in innovative ways to take advantage of the state’s a new food security initiative – and in part due to their previous experience.

As the state’s food security initiative was to be run through the decentralized planning program, the state in Kerala could not just implement a program. Rather, it needed grassroots actors to develop plans and mobilize people to operationalize these plans. BPL women in Kerala embraced the vision of the state and enthusiastically organized in an experiment termed *sangha krishi* (group farming). The radical idea behind the new program was that new energy could be injected into agricultural production by bringing in poor landless women into the sector, not as agricultural workers but as farmers. This was to be accomplished by taking advantage of the fact that there was significant amounts of land in the state had been lying fallow for years due to low agricultural prices (and other employment opportunities for men). The initiative involved women organized into collectives leasing fallow land, rejuvenating it and farming it as independent producers.

The basis for this new initiative was laid in large part by the participation of Kudumbashree members in the NREGS program. Not only did they participate in planning and the development of collective decision making in the operationalization of that program, but some of the NREGS projects involved the reclamation of fallow land. From there, it was a small step to the promotion of group agriculture.

In terms of its raw numbers, the *Sangha Krishi* initiative has been incredibly successful. It has brought over a quarter of a million poor women into farming. Through more than 44, 225 small collectives, these Kudumbashree members are now cultivating some ten million acres across the entire state of Kerala. On average, these women farmers earn

Rs.15,000-25,000 per year, with incomes varying depending on the crops grown and the number of yields annually.⁶

In addition to new and/or increased income for poor women, the solidaristic structure of the Sangha Krishi has facilitated three other important changes. First, it has brought about greater social inclusion and integration. On the one hand, it has not only allowed women to enter into the formal economy, but has done so in ways that provide them with greater dignity and self-worth.⁷ On the other hand, it has not only helped to incorporate particularly marginalized groups in the economy, such as members of STs and SCs, but also to integrate them into diverse collectives.⁸

Second, it has radically transformed the structure of work for poor women as they have moved from being wage labourers to being independent producers. In the process they have gained control over their time and labour, over what they want to produce and how, and over their produce.⁹ As farmers, they are now in a position to decide, depending on their needs, either to sell the produce or use it for their own consumption.¹⁰ Some groups have been so successful they have even been able to purchase their own land.¹¹

Third, there has been a significant change in the nature of agriculture in Kerala. The dramatic increase in the participation of poor women has not only increased food security but has gone a long way to promoting food sovereignty as control over production is being broadened and democratized.

Conclusion – Challenges and Future Directions

Kudumbashree has made remarkable progress in terms of developing social and solidarity economy enterprises and programs on the basis of strong bonds of solidarity among poor women. Kudumbashree has also made some initial steps towards linking these economic initiatives together to form the basis for a local, social and solidarity economy (e.g., through linking their own saving and lending practices to financing their own enterprises, through developing their own distribution channels, through moving into new sectors, etc.).

Still, despite such important accomplishments, the social and solidarity economy initiatives of Kudumbashree remain vulnerable and insufficient. They are insufficient in that they do not meet the needs and aspirations of their members for greater economic

⁶ Based on interviews conducted by Mukherjee-Reed between 2009-2011.

⁷ The case of a woman from Malappuram, illustrates this point. Once widowed and left with three young children, she found no means of survival other than cleaning dead bodies. Hardly adequate as a livelihood, it also brought her unbearable social ostracism. Now she is a proud member of a farming collective and wants to enter politics.

⁸ Mukherjee-Reed, in collaboration with local researchers, conducted a survey of 100 collectives across 14 districts during 2011. The survey found that 15 per cent of the farmers were Dalits and Adivasis and 32 per cent came from the minority communities.

⁹ One woman from Perambra – where Kudumbashree members have rejuvenated 140 acres that lay fallow for 26 years – summed up this transition by referencing the move from the NREGS program to group farming, “We have created life ... and food, which gives life, not just 100 days of manual labour.”

¹⁰ Since the farmers are primarily poor women, they often decide to use a part of their produce to meet their own needs, rather than selling it. Every group takes this decision democratically, depending on levels of food insecurity of their members. In Idukki, where the terrain prevents easy market access and food insecurity is higher, farmers take more of their produce home — as opposed to Thiruvananthapuram where market access is better and returns are higher.

¹¹ A member of a Joint Liability Group for farming in Mullasserri, Thrissur, relates that from their incomes of collective farming members were able to buy land both individually and as a group. Each member now had assets worth Rs 350,000 lakh, and that 16 more groups had been inspired by their example to come into collective farming.

opportunities. There are still large numbers of BPL women who remain excluded from the formal economy (Siwal 2009; Nidhesh 2008; Pillai 2007). The enterprises remain vulnerable for a variety of reasons. In micro-enterprises, Kudumbashree women work in very competitive, low profit sectors and can be easily forced out of the market by exogenous shocks. In the group enterprises in manufacturing and service sectors, the work of Kudumbashree units is also precarious, depending upon receiving orders from larger national and transnational firms who may transfer the work elsewhere depending upon market and strategic considerations. While in agriculture, Kudumbashree women have reduced their insecurity to some degree through collective action and democratic organization, they are operating in a sector with relatively low profit margins and they remain dependent to a significant degree upon a government program (MGNREGS) which may change and/or on the willingness of landlords to rent them land.

So far, the ability of Kudumbashree members to progress has been largely predicated upon their abilities to generate strong bonds of solidarity among poor women. There are a number of ways in which Kudumbashree can (and indeed is already attempting to) further leverage these bonds of solidarity among its members to extend its social and solidarity economy initiatives. First, existing programs that have been limited in their geographic scope can be extended. These would include, for example, the small livestock programs for rural women, and the incubation of micro enterprise development. Second, increasing the capacity of group enterprises in some sectors (either by developing bigger units or clustering small units together) can have significant pay-offs, e.g., by allowing for specialization, increasing the ability to compete for large orders and extending potential markets (to the national and international realms). This is a strategy that is already being pursued to some extent in the garment sector. Third, Kudumbashree units can seek to move up supply chains to capture more of the value added. Again, this already happens to some degree in the agriculture sector, e.g., with processing of pickles, dried fruit, etc. Fourth, Kudumbashree units can attempt to move into more profitable sectors. This is difficult, especially in the short term, as these sectors often involve higher skill and educational levels, are more capital intensive, etc. One possible area that is being developed, however, is sustainable tourism. Fifth, given the size of its membership base, Kudumbashree has tremendous potential to develop its own distribution channels and market to its members. Initial efforts have already been undertaken in this area in the form of home shopping networks, local markets, etc. These various directions for extending Kudumbashree's social and solidarity economy initiatives, which are already being explored, can be firmly grounded in the bonds of solidarity that already exist in the Kudumbashree network.

Kudumbashree can potentially further develop these types of initiatives by working with external partners. The concern, of course, about such a strategy is the degree to which the units are able to retain, and even leverage, their character as social and solidarity enterprises when working with external partners. Partnering with conventional firms is understandably challenging in this regard as they operate out of completely different value presuppositions. This means that most such relations are purely commercial in nature.

The other alternative for Kudumbashree, of course, is to expand their circle of solidarity outward to work with other groups and networks that share their values. There are two basic types of challenges involved here. The first is finding social and solidarity economy actors that have complementary roles (e.g., as buyers, suppliers, financiers, consultants, etc.) to play as partners. The second set of challenges involves actually developing strong relationships of solidarity with such actors. One of the problems here is that while some organizations formally subscribe to social and solidarity economy values, they do not necessarily engage with partners on the basis of these values. Rather, they operate on the basis of commercial relations (even though these commercial relations may

involve adherence to “ethical standards” and involve sourcing “sustainable” inputs and products). To the degree that they live up to values, these are primarily internal to their enterprise. They do not engage in discourse with their partners about how to collaborate on the basis of solidarity.¹²

Even when partners are formally committed to developing relationships based upon solidarity, problems can and do arise, especially when there are significant power differentials between partners (which get reflected in differential access to knowledge, levels of organizational capacity, etc.) and different cultural backgrounds (Akram-Lodhi 2013). Developing bonds of solidarity takes time and has significant costs. It is not just a matter of professing shared values, but actually working together on the basis of those values through democratic discourse and shared risk. This requires that partners have strong internal bonds of solidarity within their organization, for without these they cannot commit to and live up to the process of relationship building with other organizations. On the basis of strong internal cultures, however, enterprises can develop overlapping relationships of solidarity, relationships that are essential for moving beyond social and solidarity economy enterprises to a social and solidarity economy.

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¹² Fairtrade networks may provide the best example of this phenomenon (Hutchens 2009).

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