

# *Articulating ‘public interest’ through complexity theory*

Article

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# ARTICULATING 'PUBLIC INTEREST' THROUGH COMPLEXITY THEORY

Keywords: public interest; complexity theory; poverty alleviation;

## ABSTRACT

The 'Public interest', even if viewed with ambiguity or scepticism, has been one of the primary means by which various professional roles of planners have been justified. Many objections to the concept have been advanced by writers in planning academia. Notwithstanding these, 'public interest' continues to be mobilised, to justify, defend or argue for planning interventions and reforms. This has led to arguments that planning will have to adopt and recognise some form of public interest in practice to legitimise itself..

This paper explores current debates around public interest and social justice and advances a vision of the public interest informed by complexity theory. The empirical context of the paper is the poverty alleviation programme, the Kudumbashree project in Kerala, India.

## INTRODUCTION

The 'public interest' has historically provided the normative and largely unexamined rationale for the practice of planning. However, as with many other concepts that tend to hold persuasive power<sup>1</sup>, when examined closely the meaning splinters and reveals many guises. This in turn has led to confusion, rejection, scepticism as well as resigned acknowledgement for the need for some kind of notion to do the work that public interest does. This paper examines this difficult concept and contributes to the debate from a complexity theory viewpoint. The approach to such a theorisation draws on practice whilst speaking to various debates surrounding the articulation of the whats and hows of public interest in planning. The working of the neighbourhood groups of women in the poverty alleviation project in the state of Kerala, India known as the *Kudumbashree* project is examined. A grounded theory approach is adopted with documentation of the empirical situation preceding specific

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<sup>1</sup> Such as 'sustainability', 'beauty', 'social capital', etc.

theorisation. The neighbourhood groups and their dynamics constitute the main objects of interest. Interrogation of the data through complexity theory aims to isolate and highlight particular systemic components of the programme. The patterns thus noted, form the evidence for arguing a re-visioning of the public interest in planning. The attempt here is therefore analytical/interpretive in the first instance, but then leading to a prescriptive/normative stance.

In the first part of the paper, an overview of debates surrounding the notion of public interest in planning is presented. In particular, the ambiguity surrounding the concept as presented in the academic literature of the global North is summarised. This is then extended to provide a critical overview of the situation in the global South. In the next section, Rawl's theory of social justice is discussed along with Sen's capability approach and the communitarian view of social justice. The third part of the paper provides contextual information. The substantive domain of poverty alleviation, a brief overview of the methodology used, as well as the immediate context of this research is presented. In the fourth section, particular features of the Kudumbashree programme as highlighted when viewed through complexity theory are presented. The fifth section discusses the fieldwork more closely and advances an alternate conceptualisation of public interest. The final section presents the conclusions.

## **THE 'PUBLIC INTEREST' IN PLANNING**

This section provides an overview of current understandings of 'public interest' in planning as discussed in the global North. This is then extended to provide a critical overview of the situation in the global South, but focusing mainly on India.

The importance of 'public interest' in planning is summarised by Alexander (2002) as providing a legitimizing norm for state action in spatial and land use planning and development; a foundational normative principle for the profession; and an evaluative principle that can be used as a criterion for evaluating plans, policies or projects. In spite of the ways in which 'public interest' is important for planning and in spite of evidence that it is important in the practice of planning, Campbell and Marshall (2002) point out that the dominant contemporary view within planning academy is dismissive of the concept either because of its ambiguity or its potential elitist overtones. The ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding the concept stem from the following interrelated factors: 1) the dissolving of post-war consensus and the legitimacy of the planning profession based on rational comprehensive ideals (Campbell and Marshall, 2002); 2) the rise of postmodernist thinking which has problematised any unitary or universal idea of the public interest highlighting its hegemonic potential (Sandercock, 2000); and 3) the ambiguities that arise in trying to define the substantive content of the concept, often leading to solutions that have not always led to desirable ends thus resulting in it being labelled a 'myth' (Grant, 2005). I discuss this further below.

Campbell and Marshall (2002) point out that the dissolving of the post war consensus based on rational comprehensive models has led to disillusionment with 'public interest' in planning. In the West, the unquestioning faith in the planner as expert gradually came to be displaced by a more critical and reflective acknowledgement of the role of politics in planning. This also led to a questioning of the rationale of planning and a closer look at 'public interest' as mobilised in practice.

The workings of various modes of power through a market economy on one hand, as well as the frequent silencing of those affected, on the other, came to be uncovered (Flyvberg, 1998, Harvey, 1973, Zukin, 1991). Predominantly two modes of planning have been advanced consequent to this. The first involves a stress on collaborative processes based on a politics of consensus. The public interest here then is a de-ontological construct defined through process parameters of dialogue and negotiation that in turn are based on particular values. The planner here is an informed facilitator for the process of communicative reasoning (Healey, 1996, 2005; Innes, 2004, Forester, 1988). The second response of planning has been to stress an agonistic process based on social movements and assertion of rights. Drawing upon feminist ideologies, and studies of ethnicity, race, poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation, these stress a more adversarial and activist role for the planner (Sandercock, 2000, Thomas, 2000, Young, 2004). Questions of the public interest are brushed aside here or assumed as present, when pluralism itself is celebrated.

Parallel to the post war consensus in planning in the West, post-independence nation building was a major impetus for planning in a number of countries in the global South. This was certainly the case in India, with the commissioning of new capital cities such as Gandhinagar, Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh, etc and industrial cities such as Bokaro, Durgapur, Rourkela, etc. build on modernist principles borrowed from the global North. In fact in the four decades after independence, India had built nearly 200 big and small new towns (Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). However, a parallel displacement and questioning of the role, purpose and ideology of planning did not quiet occur within planning academia (Author ref anonymised). In India, the consequences of this can be seen in a marginalisation of the planning regime, as

informality, power and politics in cities has taken over (Roy, 2009, Speak, 2012). Paradoxically, this irrelevance of the planning regime has also resulted in the creation of innovative practices in planning that flourish in experimentation, innovation within the interstices of the cities, often beyond the radar of formal planning regimes. These innovations are also more likely to be locally attuned drawing upon local aspirations and conditions for realisation. For the planning theorist however, these are interesting case studies for they embody new forms of emerging planning practice. The attempt in this paper is to engage with one such practice and examine how the public interest comes to be defined in the same.

The second reason for scepticism regarding 'public interest' is the rise of post modernism. Post modernism brought with it an acute awareness of difference, culture and locality stressing a politics of identity, community and place. Instead of a single idea of public interest, pluralism and the celebration of 'togetherness', rather than 'oneness' seemed to be the answer (Amin *et al*, 2000, Young, 2004). Public interest became public interests as universal ideas and norms were thought of as hegemonic and totalizing. This in turn has given rise to a critique of relativism denouncing the norm of 'anything goes' in the absence of a final arbiter for conflicting claims of truth or justice. The post modern response of planning has been to acknowledge the varied influences on planning, but bestow a duty for situated ethical judgement on the planner. This situated ethical judgement is in turn to be taken not according to predetermined notions of the public interest, but instead a value based reflective judgement of the informed planner.

In the global South, the persistence of enlightenment informed ideas of the planner as expert with technical prowess, persist and continues to be privileged by planning academia in the formal planning institutions (author reference anonymised). An erosion of professional responsibility is also simultaneously, and perhaps as a consequence, occurring with formal planning tasks largely outsourced to either private sector consultants or to community based groups. For instance, the massive Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) involving an envisaged total budget of over \$20 billion, implemented in 65 cities in India required the formalisation of City Development Plans as a starting point. In the vast majority of cases however, this task was outsourced to consultants, with cities content to invoke just a symbolic or token ownership of these plans (Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). The public interest here is then not effectively claimed or articulated, leaving a void which in turn often leads to speculation, opportunism and corruption that is driven by the more universal hegemonic power of capitalism. In this situation the only hope of those marginalised is the power of disassociation, dissent, and voice if not resignation. Within a regime that is not intentionally conditioned by sets of norms and values, the articulation of public interests through an 'anything goes' relativism then assumes a sinister meaning as the reification and consolidation of powerful interests and disempowering status quos.

The third reason for the demise of public interest is the difficulty in specifying the substantive meaning of the term. This has led to the speculation that perhaps the 'public interest' is nothing but an illusion. Sorauf (1957) for instance identifies five meanings associated with the concept: 1) the public interest as commonly held value. This carries with it ideas of prior consensus and the wish of the majority; 2)



the public interest as the wise or superior interest. In more contemporary terms this might be termed as the ideologies that have gained ascendance; 3) the public interest as a moral imperative where an immutable universal moral standard is advanced; 4) the public interest as a balance of interests implying a negotiated discursively arrived consensus or a decision by a public body after due consideration; and 5) the public interest undefined - a teleological position aptly expressed by Sorauf (1957, p. 624) as “public interest is what public interest does”. Sarouf (1957, 637-638) sceptically concludes “the concept of the public interest becomes useless as a tool of analysis simply because of the conflicting definitions with which it is fraught. Its willingness to serve all parties makes it useful to none.” More recently planners and theorists have also noted this continuing scepticism surrounding the question of what the public interest is (Campbell and Marshall, 2002, Grant, 2005).

Given the relinquishing of planning as a meaningful activity in countries such as India<sup>2</sup>, one might extend the scepticism voiced above to ask whether we need to bother with a conceptualisation or theorisation of the public interest at all in planning. The answer to this has to be in the affirmative as projects, policies and schemes whether planned or unplanned continue to be advanced and justified in the name of the public interest. It is then imperative that such schemes be critically scrutinised for the meaning of public interest that gets mobilised in practice. Even more so, experimentations and innovations spawn new understandings for planning, which are well worth examining.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance see the history of the National Planning Commission of India and its demise in Patnaik (2014, 2015).

## **DEBATING 'SOCIAL JUSTICE'**

The question of public interest for planning is not far removed from the question of social justice given that allocation, be it of land, resources, funds, energy, social goods, etc. is central to the act of planning. Planning right from its genesis as a profession has been historically concerned, albeit normatively, with public values such as social justice, equity, safety, dignity and so on, giving rise to models of planning such as advocacy planning for instance. The logic of public interest thus coincides with the logic of public values including those of social justice. Writers such as Murphy and Rogers (2015) for instance have argued that normative public values in general seem to have eroded today in strongly neo-liberal regimes leaving behind an understanding of public interest synonymous with just participation or collaborative planning. However, others such as Heywood (1990) have argued that for a proposal to be accepted as being in the public interest, it must first appeal to people's sense of justice. The question of broader normative concerns such as social justice, therefore are integral to notions of public interest.

Public Institutional arrangements that safeguard issues of social justice are central to the question of poverty, as the redistribution of resources, be it income, education, benefits, health, employment, land, housing, etc, occur largely within frameworks that are instituted encouraged and sustained by the state. This section discusses three well known theoretical positions in social justice: Rawl's liberal theory of social justice, Sen's capability approach and the communitarian view of social justice. Through these, the gap towards which this paper contributes will be defined.

Rawlsian justice approaches issues of redistribution from the perspective of fairness. It is primarily concerned with how effects of arbitrariness (of birth, talent, etc) can be removed in socio-political and economic life (Rawls, 1971). The argument advocates an imagined process whereby decision makers are placed in an 'original position' behind a 'veil of ignorance' which prevents them from knowing how a decision would affect them personally. It is argued that decisions made under these circumstances, since personal benefit or loss cannot be known, would be in accordance with two principles. The first principle is that "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Rawls, 1971, p. 60). The second principle is that "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all" (Rawls, 1971, p. 60). Rawls also argues for the 'difference principle' where the fairness of a decision can be broken if, and only if, it is in favour of those marginalised. Principles of distribution arrived at through such a heuristic device, can then govern the distribution of primary goods. Primary goods are goods that every rational human being is thought to want. Rawls further compiles a list of such 'primary social goods' which is argued to be universally valid. The rights to these goods, 'human rights', are assumed to be prior to and not dependent on any one moral doctrine (Rawls, 1971).

The first of Rawls principle is explicitly concerned with the principle of liberty. Herbert Hart (1973) questions the separation and privileging of this principle of liberty to the exclusion of trade-offs with economic and social gain. This, he argues, need not be true for any society, but can be especially problematic in situations where material prosperity, religious concerns or cultural concerns may be at stake. In a discussion

titled 'Equality of What?' Sen (2008) concurs with Herbert Hart's (1973) above critique, but furthers this by focussing on the bundle of primary social goods in the Rawlsian framework. He terms this as a 'fetishism' (p,75) that privileges the primary good itself rather than its relationship with human beings,. This according to Sen, even though an improvement upon ends oriented theories such as utilitarianism (where individual pleasure is privileged) or welfarism (where the total good is privileged), Rawls' theory of justice remains still inadequate as it renders irrelevant the person-good relationship crucial to the achievement of desired end states. Both the above critiques - Hart's and Sen's - can be seen as versions of the 'relativity' problem that surfaced earlier in debates around 'public interest'. Whilst Hart stresses that prioritising between liberty, economic and social interests is relative and therefore liberty need not always be the highest priority, Sen stresses relativity in human-material relationship leading to different end results with same sets of social goods.

Sen's answer to the question of redistribution and social justice is to argue for a concept that though universal, is capable of being operationalised relatively. He calls this 'basic capability equality' (p 78). 'Basic capability equality' is an interpretation of needs and interests that allow a person to attain certain 'functionings', end states also relatively determined.

The ideas of relative importance are, of course, conditional on the nature of society. The notion of the quality of basic capabilities is a very general one, but any application of it must be rather culture-dependent, especially in the weighting of different capabilities (p.77,78).

In Sen's thesis then we find a bridge between the universal and the relative, achieved primarily through an act of abstraction. The abstract entities, 'capabilities'

and 'functionings' are universal *goals* that can be achieved through substantive *means* that are relative. The act of abstraction here is also then an act of separation between goals and means.

Yet another objection to Rawls theory of justice comes from communitarians. Sandel (2003) for instance argues against the possibility and even desirability of an 'unencumbered self'. He argues that people are encumbered with obligations and that these obligations are constitutive of who we are and therefore what we do. Further Sandel argues that this is an obligation that we hold not to society at large, but to a more limited community. Speculating on whether it is possible to be an independent self, Sandel states

I don't think we can, at least not without cost to those loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are-as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic. Allegiances such as these are more than values I happen to have, and to hold, at a certain distance. They go beyond the obligations I voluntarily incur and the 'natural duties; I owe to human beings as such. They allow that to some I owe more than justice requires or even permits, not by reason of agreements I have made but instead in virtue of those more or less enduring attachments and commitments that, taken together partly define the person I am (Sandel, 2003, p. 120).

Here we have an argument against *neutrality* and an 'unencumbered self', in normative terms as well as operational terms, resonating with Bourdieu's ideas of the individual (Bourdieu, 1984). In parallel to Bourdieu's ideas of habitus, communitarians introduce the community scale as a political space between the abstract universal and the personal individual. .

Michael Walzer incorporates relativity through the concept of 'complex equality'. He argues against any universal criteria of distributive justice as goods to be distributed are different, and so must use very different distributive arrangements, agents, criteria and ideologies.

It's not only a matter of implementing some singular principles or set of principles in different historical settings. No one would deny that there is a range of morally permissible implementations. I want to argue for more than this: that the principles of justice are themselves pluralistic in form; that different social goods ought to be distributed for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by different agents; and that all these differences derive from different understandings of the social goods themselves – the inevitable product of historical and cultural particularism' (Walzer, 2003, p.136).

Walzer's stress is on the social production and redistribution of goods. He argues that goods are conceived, created and distributed through a social process which bestows upon them particular meanings. It is only when such social processes are established can people even break away or transcend these particular meanings. So when redistribution is considered, the meanings of particular objects embodying a history of transactions will be necessarily mobilised. In the absence of such meanings redistribution itself is not possible (Walzer, 2003). Walzer further argues that the listing of any single set of primary goods as basic, as Rawls does, would be so abstract that it becomes operationally irrelevant in the determination of particular distributions. Even though such a set of primary goods may appear to be invariant across time and space, the redistribution of such a set requires a rethinking that would necessarily be socially informed and therefore relative (Walzer, 2003).

Walzer also argues that the redistributive criteria for different goods in a society are relatively autonomous. For instance, the distribution of medals for sports is based on

criteria different from the distribution of graduate degrees which in turn is different from the distribution of any market good. A good becomes dominant when those who have it can command a wide range of goods because of the fact that they have the dominant good. The distribution of this good can then become monopolistic when owning and controlling the dominant good is geared towards exploitation of its dominance. Walzer's idea of 'complex equality' targets reduction of dominance of goods in society in general. It is an argument for narrowing the realm within which a good is dominant, so as to promote a 'complex egalitarian society' (Walzer, 2003, p.142). In such a society, Walzer argues, inequalities will be present, but never dominant. So what we have here is the articulation of a universal *principle* (reduction of dominance of any good) that is defined precisely, but is sufficiently abstract to allow it to be a guiding principle that can be meaningfully applied relatively.

It is useful here to re-visit the argument for universalism. Martha Nussbaum (2008) makes an interesting and impassioned argument for universal norms which any just society must necessarily hold up as they emanate from the universal quality of what it means to be human. In the absence of such universal norms, Nussbaum argues the status quo can go unquestioned and unaddressed, resulting in the disempowerment of the weakest (Nussbaum,2008). Critiques of communitarian notions of justice point to the absence of such a vantage point from which any judgement about social meanings can be made. In arguing against communitarians, Young, (2003) questions the privileging of face to face relationships over more time-space distanced mediations. Like Nussbaum, she argues that this can lead to the reinforcement of parochial values or communist sectarianism or social prejudices. Instead Young argues for a politics of difference through which people can live

together in relations of mediation without constituting a community. She raises a series of connected questions

Many questions arise in proposing a politics of difference. What defines a group that deserves recognition and celebration? How does one provide representation to group interest that avoids mere pluralism of liberal interest groups? What are institutional forms by which the mediations of the city and the representation of its groups in decision making can be made democratic [sic](Young, 2003, p. 202)?

Young here is raising the issue of relativity without universal norms to adjudicate, reverting to a position of simple recognition of division. However as Nancy Fraser argues, (2003) this position is not so universally tenable nor is it just in terms of redistribution. Instead Fraser argues that some types of differences are to be eliminated; some should be universalized, while some should just be enjoyed (Fraser, 2003).

From the above debates, it can be concluded that one of the key tensions are in incorporating a *meaningful* conception of social justice and the public interest while at the same time retaining the capacity to take a critical and questioning attitude to these conceptions. In other words it is a challenge of how or what principles can be used to articulate a system that has the capacity to be responsive to relative meanings while at the same time retaining the capacity for adjudication. Arrow (cited in Heywood, 1990) for instance has argued for what has been referred to as the 'Impossibility Theorem'. This is the thesis that the conflation of individual personalized objectives with a communitarian preference is impossible<sup>3</sup> This paper advances a vision of public interest that avoids the above binary articulation. Further,

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<sup>3</sup> Subsequently he has however argued that 'a public or social value system is essentially a logical necessity' (Arrow 1973 cited in Heywood, 1990, p.60).



following Young's questions on institutional forms, it suggests guiding principles for the realisation of such a notion of the public interest.

## **FEMINISATION OF POVERTY**

In this section I give a limited overview of the substantive topic domain that this paper addresses: poverty alleviation in the global South. Two important general trends can be detected. The first is the recognition and incorporation of women in poverty alleviation, generally referred to as the 'feminisation of poverty' (Chant, 2008). The second is an increased engagement of the poor themselves in the design and implementation of poverty alleviation efforts. The latter is in turn linked to the wider impetus for increased civil society and community engagement in governance per se.

'Feminisation of poverty' has stemmed from a number of factors affecting women. These include underpaid and undervalued work at the lower rungs of the labour force; poor access to household and community resources; increased external insecurity (those emanating from shadow economies of prostitution and trafficking) and internal insecurity (such as domestic violence) and increased responsibilities of care and reproduction (Lingam, 2006). The above socio-economic factors result in disproportionate effects of poverty on women leading them to make greater sacrifices and thereby shoulder the bulk of the burden of poverty. Recognition of this disproportionate impact have now led to women's increased presence in poverty and poverty coping strategies resulting in them being both the target and conduit for poverty-reduction strategies (Chen *et al*, 2004). Attempts to organise women for poverty alleviation typically aim to secure a more equitable deal for women in the

work arena; support and empowerment in the home arena; and a fairer overall position for women in wider society.

The proliferation of collaborative and participatory practices in poverty alleviation has occurred due to a myriad of reasons including promotion by multilateral and bilateral donor agencies (as part of their 'good governance' agenda) mandated through conditionalities linked to aid; ideologically informed and inspired national and sub national government initiatives; civil society movements promoting empowerment of the poor and demanding a 'voice' for the poor in decisions that affect the poor; citizen initiatives that have sprung up spontaneously and gained a foothold in the interstices of service provision left vacant by governments and private sector market based provisions that cater to all sorts of demands which can be paid for in different ways.

One of the predominant mechanisms that operationalise both trends in poverty alleviation -feminisation of poverty and increased participation and collaboration - are the promotion of women collectives such as thrift and credit societies as well as micro-enterprise groups. The gendering of these now increasingly familiar poverty alleviation attempts have led to concerns about the shift towards 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation' (Chant 2008, p.190) leading in turn to the 'over-utilisation' ( p.188) of women. While some studies have shown positive impacts of such mechanisms on poverty and gender such as economic and social empowerment, formation of social capital and general progress (Vidyarthi and Wilson, 2008, Yunus, 2004, Oommen, 2008), some others argue that poverty and gender empowerment need not necessarily be linked (Murthy *et al*, 2008), that very

little actual empowerment of women takes place (Jakimow and Kilby, 2008) and that most often these strategies only nurture new forms of individual obligations and social control (Duffy-Tumas, 2009; Chant, 2008, Brett,2006). In this context, the fieldwork aimed at studying the on the ground experiences of women themselves in the Kudumbashree programme, a well regarded poverty alleviation programme in Kerala, India implemented through women collectives.

## **FIELDWORK METHODS**

This section details the methodology and the methods adopted in the fieldwork and provides information on the immediate context of the detailed fieldwork. The Kudumbashree programme was studied to understand the on-the –ground workings of the poverty reduction programme in the state of Kerala, India through the participant’s experiences. The attempt in the fieldwork was to let these experiences emerge from their stories. In line with grounded theory, a clear research question was absent when the fieldwork was conducted (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The findings on which this paper is based were therefore arrived at inductively.

Fieldwork for the research was funded by (deleted for author anonymity) and was conducted across two summers in 2008, 2009. The first visit aimed at collecting background details of the context and involved extensive search of secondary sources, project site visits and unstructured interviews with programme officials. Five project officers were interviewed and two field visits were conducted in this first phase. The detailed fieldwork in the second phase involved further site visits over four days. Participant observation of one NHG meeting on one occasion followed by semi structured interviews with members, and participant observation at the local

level project office on three occasions were conducted. Further, in-depth interviews with eight NHG presidents and secretaries, two ADS presidents, the CDS president, two project officials and two representatives from an NGO working with women's collectives were conducted. The preliminary analysis of data from the first visit generated areas of interest that formed a loose framework for observation and interviewing during the second visit. It informed certain lead questions, which were in the main, used as prompts to open up discussion in certain areas. Thereafter, the interview followed leads emerging from the conversations.

The location for the fieldwork was West Kochi – the Mattancherry area - where the poorest in the city of Kochi are concentrated. Historically, Mattancherry area developed with the port of Cochin and was a thriving market for spices and other oriental produces from the hinterlands of Kerala. The area is now a congested and decaying slum with very low levels of infrastructure including sanitation and water supply. The population in West Kochi is religiously and ethnically mixed with a substantial amount of muslim families and immigrants from other states including Gujaratis, Gowda Saraswats, Marathis, Kannadigas, and other sects who have lived in the area for a very long time.

## **THE KUDUMBASHREE PROGRAMME: THE ORGANISATION**

This section details the general architecture of the Kudumbashree programme. Certain features of the programme which are distinct from a complexity theory perspective are highlighted. These features are then carried forward into the debate around public interest.

The Kudumbashree programme is a state sponsored poverty alleviation programme encompassing broader goals of women's holistic empowerment which is seen as integral to poverty eradication. The programme is generally known as an 'exemplar' with many accolades to its credit (Kudumbashree, 2013a). As an institutionalised poverty alleviation programme, it has its genesis in the coastal town of Alleppey in 1992 under a central government<sup>4</sup> and UNICEF sponsored programme known as Urban Basic Services for the Poor. The programme was initiated by Alleppey Municipality in seven wards of the town. One of the innovative contributions of this project was the articulation of 'risk indices' for the identification of the poor. Nine non-income based 'risk indices' (such as access to water, presence of mentally or physically challenged members; condition of residence, etc) that could be verified by the community themselves in open deliberation were formulated at the neighbourhood level (Kadiyala, 2004).

These 'risk indices' guided the identification and enrolment of the poor in that a family that had four or more of the above 'risk indices' was classified as 'poor' by the community. Another innovation of the programme was the evolution of a federated system of Community Development Societies. In this system 10-20 families would constitute a neighbourhood Group (NHG). These NHGs would then be federated at ward level to form Area Development Societies (ADS) which would then be federated at town level to form the Community Development Society (CDS). Thus a multi level system of largely self-governing entities were set up. The programme in 1994 was expanded to cover all wards in the Municipality. In 1995 it was tried out in rural areas of Malappuram District and all urban areas of the state. By 1998 it was

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<sup>4</sup> India has a federal system of government with considerable power constitutionally resting with state governments.

scaled up all through the state to include both urban and rural areas (Kadiyala, 2004) and subsequently the poor and non-poor also.

The Kudumbashree programme as a whole has a multi-dimensional view of poverty with community supported self-help, facilitated by the convergence of various public sector initiatives as its core strategy. The mission statement reads –

‘[t]o eradicate absolute poverty in ten years through concerted community action under the leadership of local governments, by facilitating organization of the poor for combining self-help with demand-led convergence of available services and resources to tackle the multiple dimensions and manifestations of poverty, holistically’ (Kudumbashree, 2013b).

The critical components of the programme are micro-credit<sup>5</sup>, entrepreneurship and empowerment. The structure (discussed below) that delivers these objectives is closely linked to the local government system. They work with the Grama Panchayats, the lowest tier of a three tier system of local governance in rural areas, and the Municipalities and Corporations in urban areas.

The programme has a federated structure (see Figure 1). At the neighbourhood level, the ‘risk-families’ (those identified using the risk indices) with interested non-poor<sup>6</sup> form a Neighbourhood Group (NHG) of 10-20 families. Each NHG has a five-member elected<sup>7</sup> core team of volunteers – the Executive Committee - including a President and a Secretary, who are office bearers for the NHG. The NHGs meet

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<sup>5</sup> A system where the poor save tiny amounts of money (thrift) on a daily or weekly basis that are then collected to become a significant amount at group level so as to be bankable. The group holds the bank account and micro-management is done by the group members themselves. Credit to individuals is possible if other group members agree. The system works on the basis of *inter alia* community knowledge, trust, and peer pressure.

<sup>6</sup> The non-poor are also included as it was found that their presence helped poverty reduction. While they can participate in NHG deliberations and activities such as micro-enterprises, thrift and credit, etc and hold office, they cannot avail of any of the benefits meant for the poor.

<sup>7</sup> Elections are held every three years.

every week when they discuss problems and issues, share experiences, collect thrift money and decide on loans. The elected members from all the NHGs in a ward are federated into Area Development Societies (ADS) at the ward level<sup>8</sup>. The ADS is again governed by a seven-member elected Executive Committee supported by officials of important community welfare programmes who are ex-officio members of the ADS. The ward councillor acts as a patron. One elected member from each of the ADS is then elected to the Community Development Society (CDS) formed at local government level. A seven-member committee of elected office bearers from the CDS takes care of the day-to-day functioning of the CDS. Further, an officer in charge of poverty alleviation from the local government, acts as the member secretary. An Evaluation Committee oversees the overall functioning of the NHG-ADS-CDS system and coordinates its interface with the local government. This Evaluation Committee consists of all senior members, both elected and appointed, of the local government, senior members of line departments in the area engaged in poverty reduction and senior representatives from the banking sector who play a key role in the thrift and credit operations of the Kudumbashree programme. The whole system is further supported strategically (eg: liason with lead Bank officials); bureaucratically (eg: approval of poverty related budgets); and in terms of capacity building (eg: training programmes) by the District Poverty Alleviation Mission at District level and State Poverty Alleviation Mission at State level (Kudumbashree, n.d., Fieldwork notes, 2008).

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<sup>8</sup> Each local government area in Kerala, is divided into electoral wards which elect one councillor to the local government.

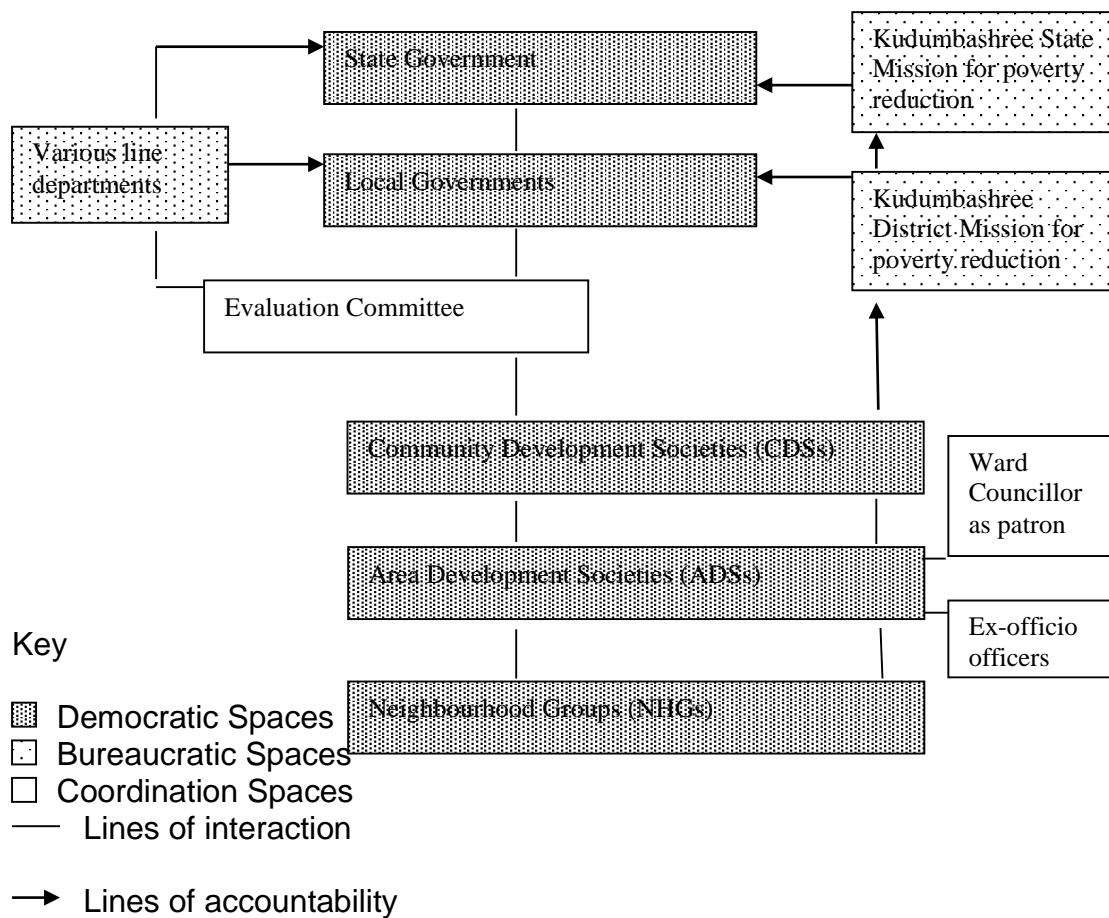


Figure1: Multi-scalar spaces of the Kudumbashree Programme  
 Source: Author reference anonymised.

The first observation in relation to the Kudumbashree programme is the rather spontaneous nature of NHG formation. Thus, if around 10-20 families so decide, they can form a NHG, with little effort. NHG formation is thus not a matter of top down demarcation or institutional boundary marking, but instead follows a dynamic geography of bottom-up boundary creation. Once the NHG forms however, it is *marked* and gets institutionally incorporated into the larger Kudumbashree system. The groups thus 'marked' then require regular and repeated 'events' defined by democratic debate (committee meetings to identify problems/issues/potentials,



discuss), the fulfilment of certain allocated 'acts' (thrift and credit, selection of beneficiaries for various programmes, etc) and the retention of a 'memory' of these (accounts, reports, minutes, etc). These together institutionalize the system.

The assemblage of events, acts, memories and values are maintained across all the levels making it possible for the scales to align themselves vertically. The system of elected representation from one level to the next, NHG to ADS and ADS to CDS, with elected representation at two or more consequent levels, traces the vertical axis of the system. This allows information and resource flow up and down. The NHG and Committee membership structures at each level incorporate ex-officio officers, ward councillors etc (see fig 1) thus allowing for the horizontal flow of information outward and inward, at the same time marking each scale level as distinct and separate, co-constituted by the lower scales, but forming an entity that is more than just the sum of the various entities in the scale below.

The planning process works from the bottom-up. Problems/issues/potentials/are first identified through debates and discussions voiced at the neighbourhood level. These are consolidated by the Executive Committee of the NHG to form 'micro-demand plans'. This then 'travels' through the federated participatory structure upward and is consolidated at ward level by the ADS. Information about funding sources, programmes, etc are taken into consideration by means of information provided by the ex-officio officers who support the programme at the ward level. The consolidated at this level then takes place in the light of information from above and below and the overview possible by the increase in scale. Finally the CDS consolidates an *action plan* (at the city or village scale as the case may be) from the

information received from the ADSs and also from the Local Government. This *action plan* is examined by the Evaluation Committee and once approved, the Committee ensures that the plan gains budgetary support as the anti-poverty sub plan of the local government (Fieldwork notes, 2008, Raghavan, 2009, Kudumbashree, 2010).

The micro-level problems/issues/concerns/potentials are the starting point for the planning process and by virtue of the downward orientation of higher scales, they become recurring orienting points for activities at higher scales. Yet the plans at different levels are required to be different, introducing an excess element at each level as an attribute of the overview afforded by scale and horizontally gained information unique to each scale. An example of a typical scalar differentiation of responsibilities for projects relating to different levels in the area of micro-enterprise is as follows:

- NHG: Formation of activity groups; support to enterprises
- ADS: Formation of activity groups spanning more than one NHG; support to enterprises
- CDS: Formation of activity groups spanning more than one ADS; Financial assistance to ME; liaison with banks and Kudumbashree Mission; liaison with LSG for financial and infrastructure support; monitoring of enterprises; organising daily/weekly/monthly markets
- District Mission: Forwarding applications for subsidy; training and capacity building of enterprises; monitoring of enterprises; formation and support of special enterprises; support for marketing
- State Mission: Sanction of subsidy; design of schemes and capacity building programmes; support for marketing initiatives; feasibility assessment and troubleshooting for Samagra projects. (Kudumbashree, 2010, 16)

In articulating the features of a complex system, amongst other features, authors such as Cairney, (2012), Ozer and Seker (2013) Lin and Lee (2011) and author

anonymised (2005, 2014) have highlighted the importance of context and bottom-up emergence; whole systemic configuration in policy or institutions; the degree of sensitivity of the policy system and the working of feedback in a system to final outcomes. The description of the Kudumbashree project above highlights much of these characteristics.

I have argued elsewhere that the Kudumbashree programme traces a three-tiered fractal structure (author reference anonymised). A fractal structure exhibits self-similarity across scales. The Kudumbashree programme is self-affine across the tiers in terms of its purpose (eradicate absolute poverty in ten years, Kudumbashree 2013b), structures (committee structure with elected representation, Kudumbashree, n.d.), processes (events, acts and memories, Kudumbashree, n.d.) values (entrepreneurship, empowerment and micro-savings) and membership (women from poor families). I argue that this bottom-up self-affine structure leads to at least three profound outcomes that are potentially valuable for poverty eradication. I will state these three effects here and provide an argument for them. The next section will provide further empirical evidence for this.

The first of the effects is a capacity for the system as a whole to sample detail and 'know' variations. The layering of scales (three in this case) allows for a very fine grain to develop at the bottom level (10-20 families form an NHG). These in turn, exposes the system as a whole to detailed formal, informal and tacit information. This reach is an invaluable attribute for poverty alleviation for support can be delivered in a meaningful way.

The second attribute is the capacity of the system to carry information efficiently and quickly to and fro from the individual to city level. This is due to the parallel, rather than sequential, location of the sub-units at each scale. Thus information regardless of the extent of the area to be covered requires only finite steps (in this case three steps -local government to CDS, CDS to ADS and ADS to NHG) to reach the individual household. The time ramification for reaching every individual poor household in the state then is the same as the time required to reach every individual household in the city or a neighbourhood. This is also invaluable in poverty reduction to ensure timeliness of response regardless of extent to be covered.

The third feature is the capacity of the system to detect inefficiencies and malpractices and self-correct quickly. If this self-correction does not happen, it can then quickly scale up to become a major issue. The communitarian dynamics at NHG level induces a sense of collectivity, the information flow encourages transparency and allows access to information. Together, these promote a sense of rights and entitlements that is poignantly political leading to profound empowerment of the Kudumbashree women<sup>9</sup>, thus achieving a key means to sustained poverty reduction.

## **PUBLIC INTEREST IN THE KUDUMBASHREE PROGRAMME**

In this section, further empirical evidence from fieldwork in the second phase is provided for the claims advanced in the previous section. This evidence is then used to articulate an alternate vision of the public interest.

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, Oommen (2008) notes that 3200 Kudumbashree members contested the local government elections in 2005 and 1408 of them won a seat.

At the NHG level, sustained debate and discussion creates a general awareness of experiences or struggles that, though different, signify outcomes of *processes* of entrapment in poverty and relative marginalisation. The capacity to see these types of correspondences comes through the dialogues within the NHG scale, but also facilitated by empowerment programmes that sensitise women to rights (rather like the consciousness raising groups associated with the early stages of the feminist movement) together with encouragement of critical reflection through innovative programmes such as the ‘Gender Self Learning Programme’. The recognition of a deep level of correspondence between the members then bestows a capacity for social identification that has the potential to go beyond the specified norms for the programme (which following a bureaucratic logic can often be ‘risk –averse’).

I did not ask for credit that time because it was not right for me to ask for money when I knew that there were others needier than me (NHG member, Interview data, 2009).

Some people do not have any food. We give them money then without looking at their thrift amount. We ask them to go buy something and eat (NHG member, Interview data, 2009).

I managed to send my child to college because the ADS chair pawned her gold jewellery to raise the money I needed. My child is good at studies. I still need to return this money to her. But my child is now going to college (NHG member, Interview data, 2009).

Following from Kudumbashree programme documentation enquiries were also made about interest charges for thrift and credit activities. However, unlike the specifications of the Bye Law (Kudumbashree, n,d), interest was not given or charged in the NHGs and NHG leaders reported that there was considerable opposition to charging of interest. In some areas reasons were religious –

‘We don’t give and take interest for religious reasons. For us [a population in a muslim area] it is a great sin to give or take interest’ (NHG President, Interview, 2009).

A more wide spread opposition seemed to be the notion that the monies were fundamentally owned by the group members. Therefore each individual member had a right to the money. Charging of interest, regardless of the specifications in the bye laws, was therefore not justified in the eyes of the group members.

The norm for individual borrowing that was being followed in all NHGs were that loan eligibility would be double the thrift amount subject to a minimum level of Rs 500 as thrift. However, the minimum amount was another matter that groups were willing to be flexible on. Thus members with less money as thrift could still access a loan if the NHG found the request to be genuine -

'We were told that the money must not be given to those without a minimum amount of Rs 500. However we are neighbours. So we give the money on our own risk sometimes (NHG Secretary, Interview, 2009).

The loans from the thrift collections were given out mostly for consumption purposes such as festivals, expenses associated with children's school opening, or emergencies such as sickness. Small amounts of money were also at times given out for productive purposes related to micro-enterprises. In some NHGs, separate funds such as festival funds, or funeral funds were also initiated in addition to regular thrift activity to help cover these requirements.

There was also evidence for women organising collectively against social evils such as domestic violence by intervening, keeping an eye on the household and watching out for each other. As one of the ADS Chairs reported (with regard to an attempted suicide by a member following domestic abuse from the husband) –

We called him the next day and spoke to him. We enquired into the problem that they were having in the house and have given them

appropriate advice. .... I see the woman regularly and we watch out for her. There has not been a serious incident since' (Interview, 2009).

Communitarian notions of the public interest can be seen here. Social goods appear to be distributed on criteria perceived as unique to the good itself, irrespective of programme criteria (for instance access to food or access to education). Further, in decisions made by the NHG, these meanings are materialised by an acknowledgement of the prior claim of family and kinships which redefines the liberal individual agent into a situated and embedded agent. We have then, at this level, the operation of a notion of public interest very much in line with communitarian notions of the same. Yet, we also see the workings of more egalitarian values such as a sense of rights (right against violence for instance) and social justice (prior claim of those more needy for instance). We see here then a simultaneous mobilisation of universal norms alongside the local. These norms however emerge from experiences and empathy that are fuelled by local communitarian values. In other words, the communitarian values select from the available set of more universal values gained through dialogue and exposure and mobilise these in situated contexts. This is different from an argument for relativity where pre-determined universal norms are operationalised differently, for here the local appears to drive the selection of the universal.

The local leaders - NHG/ADS Presidents, Vice Presidents, Secretaries and so on – play a crucial role in the start-up and functioning of the NHG units. Typically the leaders bring the bureaucracy of the government to the door step of the poor. For instance, with regard to bank loans for micro-enterprises, the leaders bring the forms related to various schemes to individuals who have their request for a micro-

enterprise loan validated by the NHG<sup>10</sup>. The leaders play an active role in the process of loan sanctioning too, by accompanying the bank officers on their visits, showing them the sites and speaking on behalf of the applicants. They are also involved in on-going monitoring. For instance, if and when a default occurs, the ADS office bearers are notified and they make enquiries as to the reason for default. For cases where there is no valid reason for default, local level pressure is exercised in the form of repeated requests on the basis that other members also need access to the money and that therefore the money taken must be repaid<sup>11</sup>. In instances where the default is for genuine reasons, the information is conveyed back to the bank, when more lenient terms are normally negotiated for the borrower. This again is valuable 'street-level bureaucracy' which is more comprehensible to members some of whom may never have been to a bank at all. It is also the mobilisation of a choice of which universal value to promote – the value of responsibility for money or the value of compassion. As before, the choice is a matter informed by the particularity of the case.

The ADS/NHG leaders also do not hesitate to make demands of the bureaucratic system on behalf of their groups when required. Thus with respect to a missing file –

'Got the forms from the office! When a hue and cry was made regarding this, the forms appeared by themselves' (Participant observation, 2009).

The higher tiers were generally found to be empowered and confident in asserting what they believed to be their rights. This was significantly facilitated by the two way flow of information which introduced a great amount of transparency into the

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<sup>10</sup> Such loan applications are vetted by the NHGs as they are often released without collateral security.

<sup>11</sup> Given that loans are made on the recommendation of NHGs, if there is a default, access to loans for all members of the NHG is affected.



implementation of poverty alleviation schemes. This view of one ADS Chair was widely shared -

They will get the information anyway from some source or the other. Then they will ask why it was not announced in the NHGs So I usually make it a point to immediately announce all new information about schemes as soon as I have the information (Interview data, 2009).

There was also evidence of women being able to come to confront and come to terms with perceived inadequacies. Thus one ADS Vice Chair talked to us about the challenges she faced—

I understand things said in the Executive since it is said in Malayalam [the regional language]. If I don't understand any English words, that may be used, I note it down and then ask my husband for the meaning. .... I write things in white paper and then read it to the councillor. There are some deficiencies due to my lack of education. However, I don't dwell on it. I make an effort to understand things and I just need to convey this understanding to the people' (Interview data, 2009).

The sense of rights that the collectives have acquired is well exemplified in the rift that one ADS was having with the ward councillor. The ADS perceived that the councillor (who also has to sign the applications for various schemes) had been acting in a patronising way favouring a small group of favourites over the needy. Further they believe that the Councillor had been instrumental in denying benefits to the needy and had confronted her on this.

'Benefits have gone to the undeserving. Those who are with the councillor. There are people who have got cycles and sold it in the market soon after. This is while there are so many deserving people' (Interview, 2009).

After many unsuccessful attempts at resolving the issue, even with the mediation of the Mayor of the Corporation, the ADS finally decided to file a legal case against the councillor in the high court. At the time of the fieldwork this had just been filed.

These benefits are not family property of anyone. Its government money. She should not be denying this to the people who deserve it. We have no

option but to take a legal route now (ADS President, Vice President, Interview, 2009).

This step was broadly owned by the ADS. Thus -

The ADS Chairperson was a person who would cringe in the face of opposition power. We have now managed to change this (ADS Vice-President, Interview data, 2009).

'We had to face numerous threats ... However there is no point in living in fear' (ADS Vice- President, Interview data, 2009).

At the higher levels then we have the assertion of more universal values (at least sufficiently universal to approach a court of justice). The favouring of the least well off, in the distributions of bicycles, for instance, echoes ideals of Rawlsian difference principle and similarly the litigation and agnostic encounters build on ideas of rights (also informed by a feminist critique). At higher scales, then more universal ideals of public interest seem to be mobilised in practice. The local scale is however present in that it informs tactics and initiatives. For instance dealing with the fear of opposition in the ADS President or drawing on local level knowledge to ascertain misappropriation of benefits which influence the agonistic stand and the decision to pursue legal action. It is conceivable that at higher scales clear principles of decision making will need to be mobilised as not all those involved can be presumed to have first-hand knowledge of problems and issues and thereby possess an empathetic identification. More universal notions of public interest take precedence here with the local, in the main, contributing operationally. Thus, we have the local in the global here.

The Kudumbashree programme shows the mutual embedding of scales then. This mutual embedding makes it possible to bring a critical dimension to situated judgements whilst making the universal meaningful and worthy of agnostic

encounters. The public interest mobilised within the programme is then both local and global; communitarian and universal with the relative weights shifting with scale. There is thus a scalar sensitivity in the operationalisation of the public interest.

In general, the Kudumbashree programme is acknowledged as a success. It has many awards to its credit, but more importantly, it is a programme that has fascinated academia and as a consequence, it has been studied and theorised by many (see for instance Oommen, 2008, John, 2009 Chathakuklum and Thottunkel, 2010; Williams *et al*, 2011, 2012; Kadiyala, 2004, author referenced anonymised.). By and large, while these studies do not necessarily claim the absence of any issues in the Kudumbashree, they do broadly concur that the programme as a whole is a success in that it embodies a just approach to poverty alleviation. As Oommen states (2008, p.14)

‘KDS [Kudumbashree Development Society] is a microfinance institution with a radical difference from its counterparts in the rest of the world. Even while acknowledging the various shortcomings, CDS as a community based organisation holds out tremendous potential for enlarging freedoms, and enhancing and widening the capabilities and choices of poor women in the state’.

The evidence in this paper also reveals positive change in women’s social life.

‘There has been a very great social change. Prior to the NHG formations women would not come out of their houses ..... They would either watch TV or just gossip. The situation has changed now. People are communicating now (NHG President, Interview data, 2009).

Perhaps the most telling indicator is that the risk indices for the poor have been upwardly revised in 2009 as poverty alleviation starts yielding results. Yet, as mentioned earlier, studies in particular locations highlight substantive aspects that can be improved and there is no claim here that social justice is uniformly achieved in all operations of the Kudumbashree. However, it can be claimed that when such

violations of social justice occur, the system has the potential to take steps to self-correct and that this is facilitated by the system design itself. Just as Walzer (2003) defines the notion of 'complex equality' on the principle of reduction of dominance of social goods and not the elimination of dominance; so does complexity theory suggest, not the elimination of social injustice, but the containment and constant self-correction of the same.

Proponents of complexity theory have highlighted the importance of a systemic view that explicitly considers the open boundaries to the context and the systemic properties of any entity that is studied. While the intellectual argument for a less positivistic approach is not seriously disputed, work on this remains largely explanatory or interpretive. Normative or prescriptive guidelines from non-positivistic perspectives on practical concerns such as the design of systems, institutions, policies and projects are rare. As Varghese and Raman Kutty (2012) argue, the need of the hour is to pay more attention to (inter alia) understand the dynamic nature of how the behaviour of a complex system is formed and how information drives the system to change in practice.

I have argued earlier that the structure of the Kudumbashree programme allows for a systemic capacity to a) sample detail and 'know' variations; b) carry information efficiently and quickly to an individual to city level; and c) detect inefficiencies and malpractices and self-correct quickly. In other words we have a constantly evolving experiential learning organisation. The study, in its second phase was undertaken to investigate the impact of this systemic nature on the way in which public interest comes to be defined in practice. What emerges is a scalar differentiation in the relative weightage of principles in decision making.

While advocates for complexity theory have argued for it as a meta-theory encompassing several theories in its quest to understand systemic features, the argument for scalar differentiation has been less forceful. In this article, I argue that 'complex' as opposed to 'complicated' systems,<sup>12</sup> are necessarily organised through scales (not hierarchies). In fact, each of the scales in complex systems is co-constitutive with unique powers and knowledge for each scale and are not just derivatives and detailings of higher scales. In such a system then, notions of public interest gets differentiated in scale. As can be seen in the case here, the lower tier operationalises a more communitarian view of public interest, while the upper tier tends towards more universal or abstract ideas of what the public interest is, such as say 'rights to information or goods' and notions of the 'deserving'. In the case of a conflict of values, the bank loans repayment for instance, the choice of which public interest is mobilised, is informed by the detail of the local, a function in itself of the systemic organisation. Thus complex systems are capable of simultaneously operationalising multiple meanings of what the public interest is. In the first part of this paper I reviewed the literature to show that one of the major controversies surrounding the notion of public interest, in the global North is the controversy over relativity and universality; difference and uniformity. I then argued that in the global South, especially in India, often the public interest is not meaningfully claimed by planners which then can mean that they are either ignored or simply bought out. In such situations, where also poverty is wide spread, initiatives such as the Kudumbashree show us ways of operationalising a self-regulating, yet dynamic and

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<sup>12</sup> Complex systems are organised, not disorganised (chaotic systems) and they cannot be easily put together by following simple rules (complicated) either. For instance a social community is not a crowd with no meaningful interrelationships and it is not a relationship made up of simple rules such as say a row of neighbours. Complex systems are thus ordered in a way that makes the sum of the parts meaningful in its own right.

spatially sensitive form of ensuring social justice which simultaneously encompasses both communitarian and more universal notions of the public interest. However, this calls into question, the role of the planner. Given that the participants themselves hold office and are empowered to voice their concerns and fight for it if needed, even the planner's more recently advanced roles as a facilitator or even an activist seem to become largely redundant. Could this mean the death of the planner?

I would argue for two roles for the planner. In the first role, the planner assumes the role of a teacher/trainer who enables others to perform. In the Kudumbashree programme, members are constantly made aware of alternate ways of thinking and doing, though the decision to adopt the same remains with the participants. In the second role, the planner assumes the role of architect or designer who works on designing and modifying system parameters that set up the system itself. She is here the creative bureaucrat who designs the spaces for others to act. As Chathukulam and Thottunkel, (2010, p.189) state the meaning of the state is changed here from that of a 'welfare provider' to that of a 'welfare facilitator'. With the Localism Act in the UK enacted in 2011, innovations such as the Neighbourhood Forums (with devolved planning powers albeit limited) are being currently set up. Perhaps the time has come when this style of planning, which I have discussed elsewhere as second order planning (author reference anonymised) catches up with the global North as well.

## **Conclusions**

This paper aimed to articulate a notion of public interest informed by complexity theory. In the first part the controversies and ambiguities surrounding the term 'public interest' in planning in the global North, were discussed. This was summarised as

stemming from 1) the dissolving of post-war consensus (Campbell and Marshall, 2002); 2) the rise of postmodern thinking which then problematised any universal idea of the public interest (Sandercock, 2000); and 3) the ambiguities in defining the substantive content of the concept (Grant, 2005). The situation in the global South, especially India, was then discussed briefly. Here it was argued that India, especially the academia, continues to predominantly engage with the rational comprehensive model in planning with the consequence of being either ignored by wider politics or being co-opted into compromising positions.

In the second part, I reviewed wider theories of social justice developed within political science. In particular, Rawl's theory of social justice and two critiques of it were discussed. Sen's capability approach and the communitarian notion of social justice advance alternate visions. It was concluded that the tensions have predominantly been between universal conceptions of social justice and interpretations that stress relativity and situated meaning.

The third section gave a brief introduction to trends in poverty alleviation initiatives. Feminisation of poverty and the growth of participatory decision making were particularly highlighted. This provided the substantial backdrop for understanding the Kudumbashree programme. The methods adopted for the fieldwork were then described. The fieldwork in the main followed a grounded theory approach. The immediate context of the fieldwork - a multicultural, mixed population in the poorest district of the city of Kochi - was then introduced.

The fourth section reported from the first phase of the fieldwork. A description of the Kudumbashree programme was provided highlighting features of it that warrant attention from a complexity theory viewpoint. The fifth section provided the empirical evidence for efficiency in sampling, information flow and self-correction of the system. The field work also revealed notions of public interests that come to be defined within the Kudumbashree. The main argument was for public interests that are mutually embedded and co-determined across scales to reveal varying emphasis on both communitarian tendencies and universal tendencies depending upon the scale at which the public interest is examined. The view from complexity theory thus introduces scale sensitivity into current understandings of the public interest and argues for the need of the simultaneous presence of the universal and the particular for issues of social justice such as poverty alleviation.

Finally it was argued that mutual embedding of scalar variations gives rise to a capacity for the system to self-correct. Though this can be seen to be very welcome in the context of the global South, especially in India where the legitimacy of the formal role of planning is substantially eroded in practice, it does pose wider challenges for what the role of the planner might be. I have argued that the planner here could be seen as either a teacher/trainer working directly with communities to empower them to run the system or the planner could be the architect/designer of such systems that enable others to plan for themselves.

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