



Kuthumbakkam

Laboratory of Village Economics

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1. Introduction

It takes an hour by bus from the Broadway – Chennai main bus station to Kuthumbakkam, a village located on the outskirts of the capital of Tamil Nadu. The Kuthumbakkam Panchayat comprises of seven hamlets in total. Even though these are located quite close to each other, they are characterized by different conditions. The agriculture on rain fed lands is still practised around the hamlets of the north-western part. While from the hamlets of the south-eastern part one can observe the on-going construction of high buildings and other signs of proximity to the rapidly encroaching Chennai city.

At the beginning of 1990s Kuthumbakkam had poor basic infrastructure, livelihoods were insecure and cases of domestic violence against women and children were reported. The area was a major regional hub of illicit arrack brewing and black market. After quitting a city job and returning to his village, in 1996 Elango Rangaswamy won the *panchayat* election as an independent candidate. Becoming a new *sarpanch*, he came up with ambitious visions of village development. He introduced grassroots level

planning and made an attempt to mobilize the local people. His initial aspirations were to provide decent housing for all, to form more self-help groups, to create employment through *panchayat* activities and to create livelihoods based on local resources. Being an engineer, Elango started working on energy saving solutions for both the public space and households. A project called the Panchayat Academy was started in order to spread good practices, to educate and build capacity in *panchayat* leaders in Tamil Nadu.

It is necessary to ask: how did these ambitious plans work in reality? What was the response of the community? As this was the main aim of our research, we can also ask if this model is able to build strong local economies or larger self-sufficiency of villages and to promote ecological sustainability.

The aim of this case study is to carry out an analysis of various activities and development projects in Kuthumbakkam which were initiated by Elango Rangaswamy. The applied framework is “What is an alternative” approach (Box 1) developed by Kalpavriksh. Our approach is also inspired by the concept of Radical Ecological Democracy (RED)¹.

BOX 1: WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE?

By alternatives is meant initiatives (practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworks), that are practiced or proposed by communities, government, civil society organizations, individuals, with the following key features:

- 1. Ecological sustainability, including the conservation of nature (ecosystems, species, functions, cycles) and its resilience.*
- 2. Social well-being and justice, including lives that are physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually fulfilling, and where there is equity (including gender equity) in socio-economic and political entitlements, benefits, rights and responsibilities.*
- 3. Direct democracy, where decision-making starts at the smallest unit of human settlement, in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part, and builds up from this to larger levels of governance that are downwardly accountable.*
- 4. Economic democracy, in which local communities (including producers and consumers, often combined in one) have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, markets; where localization is a key principle, and larger trade and exchange are built on it.*

No single initiative may have all these features, but even if they have one, they are worth featuring here, so long as they are not seriously threatening the others.

Source: www.kalpavriksh.org and www.vikalpsanqam.org

1. RED is an evolving framework of governance in which each person and community has access to decision-making forums of relevance to them, and in which the decisions taken are infused with ecological and cultural sensitivity, and socio-economic equity. The RED focuses on human well-being which can be achieved without endangering the earth and ourselves, and without leaving behind half or more of humanity. For more information see: <http://radicalecologicaldemocracy.wordpress.com>.

Methodology

This report is based mainly on our four-day long visit to the place between 25th and 28th August 2014. This visit was carried out under the current project. The report draws also on the two earlier visits - on 24th January and 5th March 2013. In order to collect as much relevant information as possible we went through a few existing materials on Kuthumbakkam (Rangachari 2009, Subramanian 2013, India Together 2013).

During our stays we had a chance to visit the Kuthumbakkam hamlets including the integrated housing project Samathuvapuram. We could see several manufacturing units and talk to people working there. We also visited few neighbouring villages influenced by the model of development in Kuthumbakkam. During these visits we were interviewing workers, residents, and people involved in local politics. During the interviews we had the four criterions of an "Alternative" on our mind (Box 1). However, even more important is the fact that every day we could spend a few hours on three separate visits in the company of Elango, who shared with us his perspectives and insights into both local and national issues of development.

2. Setting Up of the Campus

Elango Rangaswamy was born and grew up in Kuthumbakkam. His advanced studies

Elango at his Workplace



brought him to Chennai where he was studying at the Institute of Chemical Technology. After completing his graduation he was employed by Oil India as drilling Executive Engineer. By that time he was still regularly on weekends coming back to his village where he gained respect of people thanks to his achievements in the city. He desired to improve the living conditions in his native village and felt strong connection with local people. When he was supposed to be placed to Assam (after Odisha), too far from his birthplace, he decided to leave his job. In 1994 he returned to Kuthumbakkam. He was given 1 acre of land from his father and for his livelihood he started doing research for industries. Since his childhood Elango, born into a Dalit family, was troubled by the caste-based discrimination, men's drunkenness and the environment prone to violence. That time he felt a need to change social atmosphere and also to bring the development - that time for him was represented by big connection roads and various industries (e.g. chemical). When elections came in 1996 Elango was hesitant because he, as an educated person, "didn't want to beg for votes" but he was able to raise significant support thanks to his active involvement in village affairs. He also benefited from the reservation system for the Dalits, won the elections and became the *sarpanch* for two consecutive terms.

Regarding the reasons for his eagerness to return to his village, Elango says: "I was keen on finding solutions to rural problems like wife-beating, illicit arrack distillation, drunken men disrupting the village, exploitation by politicians, poverty, caste-based differences, enmity among village communities, and general backwardness in the village." He was also worried about the growing migration towards cities (which he was a part of) which had a negative impact on village life in general. In order to prevent depopulation of rural places

he realized that there was a need for developing a viable local economy. By improving the quality of life and providing meaningful employment, the needs of many people can be met on a local level.

Since a large part of suffering in the village was due to caste prejudices and gender-caste discrimination, the atmosphere in the village was not encouraging for any innovations. It was at the very beginning that Elango had to face the greatest of obstacles. Becoming a *sarpanch*, he decided to change substantially the status quo and, first of all, to put an end to the alcohol black market. Illicit arrack brewers perceived Elango as someone who was out to ruin their business and they even threatened to kill him. He overcame this difficult period with support of the people. He also felt more secure thanks to the presence of his parents and the good position of his father who was government officer. After succeeding in “cleaning up”, unemployment became the most pressing matter because many people lost their income from arrack selling. This was the time when small production units were introduced. Village women became gainfully employed, for instance, in putting together spare parts for manufacturers or in producing building tiles. At this time Elango did not focus on the environmental aspects of development. The main objectives were to develop industries in order to employ people. One more important initial step was the improvement of the infrastructure and construction of concrete roads for the entire *panchayat*. Elango and others realized that the ideal construction material was available from the waste resulting from the local industry production. For instance instead of the prescribed rubble material this waste material (e.g. granite) was used to make the storm drains. As a result of this policy a few lakhs of rupees were saved.

From late 1990s, Elango travelled across the country and studied several experiments in rural

development. It only reinforced his conviction that economic activity would be the backbone of changes in Kuthumbakkam. In 2001 he founded the Trust for Village Self-Governance which has remained an active platform of interactions even after he stopped being a village leader in 2006. During the process various economic activities were explored - such as units that manufacture or process pulses, dairy, groundnut, coconut, jute, leather, handloom textiles, bakery goods, low-cost building materials, kerosene burners, hammocks and a variety of soaps. Elango’s projects enabled more households to get jobs in local firms and activities. Out of 1050 households in Kuthumbakkam around 140 have at least one member in the manufacturing units. On average, the income of one family rose to Rs. 20-25 000 per month (big jump from Rs. 3-4000 in the late 1990s). Out of 150 persons directly employed in production around 120 are Dalits and 112 are women. In Elango’s words, more people became more confident and they are able to get jobs in other local firms and other activities.

The transformation of the village was a slow struggle, but the demonstrative effect of Elango’s work attracted more and more people as well as the attention of the media. This helped overcome some initial resistance from the district administration also.

Elango is often considered a Gandhian. However, he disagrees with this designation

Elango with Trust Employees



BOX 2: SUBJECTS OF THE PANCHAYAT ACADEMY

- ◆ *Planning process of the panchayat & practical knowledge of the constitution*
- ◆ *Planning purpose – simply how to make it*
- ◆ *Social initiative – women, social justice*
- ◆ *Sustainable technologies – building materials, efficient energy, construction*
- ◆ *Village-level disaster management – floods, cholera*
- ◆ *Government schemes & finances – what is available, how it should be used effectively*
- ◆ *Gender – sensitivity to gender*
- ◆ *Sanitation & water*
- ◆ *Village economy as a whole*

and only states that he has “found many of Gandhi’s ideas, especially in My Experiments with Truth, to be a source of strength and inspiration for his work.” He admits that many of the problems which he faces can be solved by applying this way of thinking. The economic model of village networking that he espouses (see Section 5) draws on the work of J.C. Kumarappa. Interestingly, Elango’s initial orientation was Marxist, and he still seems to retain some elements of this in his commitment to equity in various forms.

Since Elango felt the need of spreading good practices in 2003 he launched the project of regular meetings and trainings for people involved in community politics and economy. The Panchayat Academy is supposed to be a storehouse of alternate approaches (see Box 2). One more important focus area was the awareness of the *panchayat* system itself. Elango said that he had benefited greatly from knowing the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act, because he could quote from it when his authority was questioned. As more *panchayat* leaders become aware of the laws and the authority they wield under them, change can start to happen. The Panchayat Academy is a tool mainly for spreading this knowledge. The Academy so far trained around 8000 people from 450 *panchayats*.

3. Innovative Construction and Housing

The following three problems of Indian villages are usually crucial: water management, employment and housing. In 1997-1998 Elango, with contribution of the

government, was able to organize deepening of water bodies and water de-silting. Storm water drains were also constructed. All of this supported the village capacity to harvest and store water during rains. The question of employment was always central to Elango’s work and the *panchayat* used local labour whenever it was possible. Next was the challenge of providing dignified housing to the poor.

Searching for innovative solutions instead of following top-down schemes had already become a common practice in Kuthumbakkam. The construction methods and the housing schemes do not constitute an exception. Some alternative (or rather traditional) construction methods were used starting with the production of cement stabilized compressed mud blocks. This simple technology is not new, it is rather rediscovered. New houses in Kuthumbakkam were built using compressed mud blocks, because the local soil was suitable for this use. In other places, stone may be more easily or cheaply available. The drains were built using regular bricks and mortar and also using hollowed-out tree trunks. Granite waste was utilized in rubble for masonry construction. Using all these simple techniques the village could save money and provide work to the local people. In Elango’s words dignity starts with decent housing - and a decent toilet. New houses were mostly provided with brick toilets. One of the current projects of the Trust is designing a simple prefabricated toilet which is very easy to install for a price of less than Rs. 12,500.

What else is remarkable about the approach to housing in Kuthumbakkam? In 2000, a



Samathapuram Housing

project of integrated housing was started. It was called Samathuvapuram and resulted in the founding of a new – seventh - hamlet of Kuthumbakkam. Samathuvapuram means “equal habitation”. For the construction of new houses the muddblock technology and variation of local materials were used. Around 160 families were employed for a year of construction. Several of them became experts in ferrocement panels and joists, mud blocks or cost-effective windows. There are 50 twin houses in the hamlet, each shared by lower and upper caste families (around 52% of the population of Kuthumbakkam are Dalits). Most of the 100 families who were given the houses there were personally contacted by Elango. This personal involvement probably played a major role in the sustainability of the project. Now people from different castes live there together, side-by-side. There were a few cases of inter-caste marriages, but we were unable to find out the exact number. The facilities in Samathuvapuram include a community centre, playgrounds, a library, an *anganwadi* and a youth club. There is no temple in the hamlet because its presence might create a dividing dynamics. Some disputes were recorded - for instance, one upper-caste family complained about their neighbours cooking non-vegetarian food. Elango visited both families and helped resolve the whole issue by moving the kitchen to another corner of the house. This case

again shows that personal involvement was crucial.

This housing model was adopted at many other places in Tamil Nadu under the so-called Samathuvapuram scheme of the state government but the results were not really convincing. According to Elango, initiators sometimes placed random families together without having sufficiently counselled them into what this new habitation might entail.

After seeing the hamlet and talking to several inhabitants of Samathuvapuram we got the impression that the integrated housing idea is working well. The only regret expressed by them was about the fact that public space is not fully used.

The state when 100% of families had proper house was achieved in 2005. In 2008 Elango was one of the finalists of the UN Habitat Award. Thanks to UN Habitat Forum he could visit Germany and Cuba to study housing practices. He was amazed especially when he learned about the transformation of Cuban economy and localisation of production after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990. That time Cuba, after being cut off the imported oil from USSR, had to boost local agriculture and manufacturing. The limited resources of the island needed to be used sustainably.

4. Solar Energy Projects

Elango says that an Indian village can be self-sufficient only when it is self-sufficient in terms of energy. Being an engineer, a great part of his passion lies in designing and manufacturing. An example of this can be found in CFL-based energy lamps which are able to save more than two-thirds of electric power. The production took place within the village, only the bulbs were outsourced. There are 320 such streetlights at Kuthumbakkam which resulted in savings of Rs. 15,000 per month on electricity.

Among the various devices in Elango's office there is a fan running on solar power with consumption of 23 watts. Even the most efficient electric fan in the market requires about 75 watts. Recently Elango designed a family package of electronic devices for households. The "kit" includes one solar panel, one fan, 4 bulbs and a recharger. The total cost is Rs. 22,000, and in 2014 there are already more than a thousand orders of these kits. Elango has several more ideas in his head - such as solar-powered rickshaw or spinning and weaving machines.

When talking about energy, it seems that Elango does not emphasize the environmental perspective (which is strongly present) in the first place. He rather stresses the rationality and enjoyment which an engineer has in saving resources and designing smart devices. If an Indian village is self-sufficient in terms of energy, towns can also achieve it. Moreover, if energy requirements are met on local levels, there will not be a need for a nuclear power plant. It is just one example of how sustainability is firmly incorporated in Kuthumbakkam experiments. The question is to what extent the sustainability is supported by local people and their consumption.

5. Network Growth Economy

One of the greatest challenges for a village is to mobilize funds for development. In the 1990s Elango commissioned a door-to-door survey, which found that Kuthumbakkam consumed Rs. 60 lakh worth of goods and services every month. To his surprise, it also showed that the village had the potential to produce goods worth Rs. 50 lakh every month. Elango realized that clusters of villages could become economic powerhouses less dependent on the urban, national or global market. He named this approach as

Network Growth Economy. "The Network Economy concentrates on prosperity creation rather than poverty eradication. This initiative focuses on evolving self-dependent economy in the rural areas rather than worry about their place in the global market" he says.

A cluster can be already formed by six villages. It will become a kind of a free-trade zone. The Trust for Village Self-Governance is working towards networking the member villages of the Panchayat Academy, e.g. Koduveli, Adigathur and Kondancheri are some of the other villages. Regarding the conception of the village clusters, these villages will identify and produce a range of needed goods and services without any two of them necessarily producing exactly the same. They will consume their own produce, supplemented with the produce of other villages as needed. The money will rotate within the villages and it will not leave the region because it will be invested back within the cluster.

The network villages are supposed to share their produce between themselves and supplement each others' production and processing. What will be produced in excess will be sent to outside world - other village clusters or towns for money which in turn can buy products and services not available in the village. A network may contain 15-20 villages and a population of 50,000-60,000.

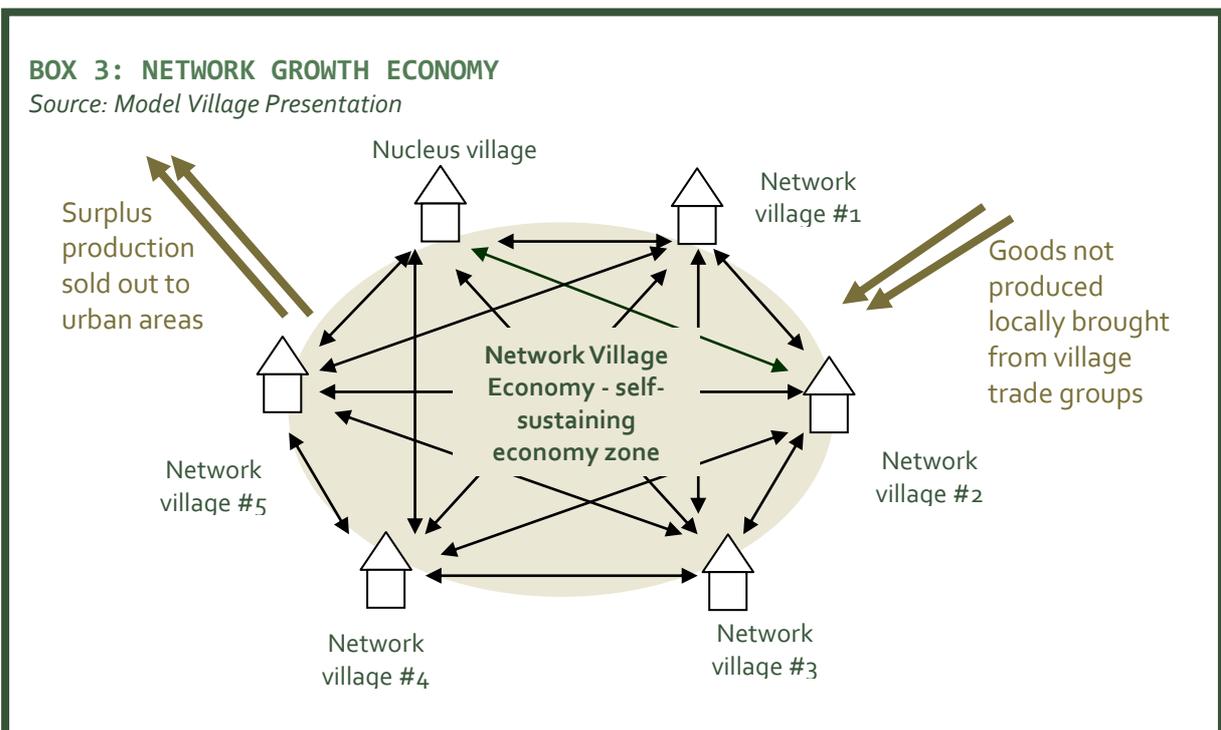
Manufacturing Unit, Kuthumbakkam



Typical village consumption consists of 40 items including rice, dal, oil, baked foods, vegetables, cereals, soaps, detergents, clothes etc. The production of these items is not meant for sale outside the region. The idea of Network Growth Economy counts on support of all villages in creating local market. Even if a series of experiments with networking and exchanging goods have been made, Network Growth Economy is still mostly at the level of theory and preparation (See Box 3).

organic cultivation and local food links (Box 4). One of the future plans of the Trust is to establish an investment fund for farmers. However the future of farming in Kuthumbakkam itself is uncertain (see Section 6) and the village will need the support of other farmers in the region.

The key role in the networking is played by the Panchayat Academy. Thanks to this platform the neighbouring villages are inspired by Kuthumbakkam and vice versa. The positive impact is observable for instance in Adigathur village. K. Chidambanadan, the ex-sarpanch of the village and C. Sumathi, the current sarpanch (the two are married), were inspired especially by the model of housing. Currently they are working on sustainable construction of houses and they came up with their own prototype of toilets. Chidambanadan admits the Academy has had significant impact on him because it helped him to find practical solutions. His own passion is organic farming. We could see his natural paddy cultivation and together we visited Jagan, another farmer working on



BOX 4: NALLA KEERA – GOOD GREENS

"We are normal people who are trying to bring fresh organic vegetables to our customers and bring profit to farmers by reducing the gap between farmer and consumer" says Jagan, the initiator of the project Nalla Keera (<http://nallakeerai.com>) and a friend of Elango. His village Pakkam, where he owns a few acres of land, is located around 20 km from Kuthumbakkam and 40 km north-west from Chennai.

A few years ago, when employed in the IT sector Jagan thought about the dangerous impacts of pesticides and chemical agriculture, and he decided to preserve the virtues of high-quality vegetables to serve the Chennai city customers. His aim was also to encourage the local farming community to take up this organic cultivation not as an experiment but as a kind of lifelong experiential association. And so he started Farm to Customer Private Limited.

The motto (and a part of the logo whose design reminds one of the IT sector) of Jagan's company is "Farm to Consumer". They deliver the results of their production to Chennai every day. Their customers are often from the IT sector. Given the initiator's background a part of the production used to be sold directly to IT companies. Nalla Keera also supplies around 60-70 shops selling organic food.

Apart from selling vegetables, Jagan has been involved in mobilizing the farmers. Concerning the wider farmer community, Good Greens Farm used to host the regular Mutual Learning Sessions which helped to enrich organic methods of agriculture. These sessions used to be held by the legendary local farmer Late Namallwar before he passed away. Jagan identified a transition period of 3 years as the biggest obstacle for farmer's transition to organic production. He thinks certain types of crops can be beneficial for quicker soil regeneration.

Nalla Keera is an example of sustainable, original and economically viable organic farming. However, the founder's particular background, which brought a marketing advantage, has to be taken into account. This particular model of selling could be hardly duplicated without a diverse network of contacts.

6. Challenges

Kuthumbakkam and other villages on the outskirts of growing Chennai will probably undergo a transition towards more and more urbanized areas. A large number of polluting industries have already set up their factories nearby (e.g. Coca-Cola Company, Marine Blue). Also in 2007 more than 100 acres of grazing land was proposed for a Solid-Waste-Management plant. Five Municipalities – Ambattur, Maduravoyal, Tiruverkadu, Poonamallee, Valasarvaakkam and Porur Town Panchayat planned to dump their waste there. The Gram Sabha of Kuthumbakkam passed a resolution against the project.

In 2009 the villagers filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Madras High Court as the waste was supposed to be placed at the catchment area of Chembarambakkam lake, the major water source of Chennai city which might had been affected. The court hearings went on for a year and the judgement directed the *panchayat* and concerned municipalities to approach the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) and to substantiate their claims. The

judgement also directed the TNPCB (Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board) to conduct a public hearing to register the views of the people affected. The *panchayat* approached the SEIAA and gave all the documents to substantiate its claim. In the public hearing held on 21.09.2010, people registered their claims and also pointed out the shortcomings in the project's (Rapid) Environment Impact Assessment Report. But the officials turned a deaf ear and maintained their stand that no pollution will ever affect any natural resources in the site.

Followed by this, a seminar was held at IIT Madras on in January 2010 where eminent scientists and environmentalists condemned the proposed solid waste management plant as this is being planned at the catchment area of Chembarambakkam lake. They expressed their concern that Chennai citizens may not have good drinking water at all, if the proposed project is to come through. The current status is that the decision on the proposal is still pending with TNPCB (Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board).

The area is not able to contain the expansion of the capital. The government declared 70%



Village Industry Unit, Kuthumbakkam

of Kuthumbakkam as residential zone. One of the major challenges is the agricultural sustainability. Because of the city influence the traditional paddy or millet cultivation is decreasing. It means the agriculture might disappear in another decade. That is why Kuthumbakkam will have to rely on farmers from different villages of the cluster if localisation comes true.

Elango went through more than a year of heart problems. During this time he was naturally unable to be always present in his village. This resulted in the closure of a few small enterprises (e.g. hammock producing unit) and computer classes for children. As he said, more initiatives might have collapsed. This indicates very high dependency of experiments on their initiator and also sort of fragility. In 2014, we could see a team of people managing the campus but in terms of welcoming visitors, keeping an eye on everyday production and decision-making, the crucial role of Elango is beyond any doubt. Since it seemed that the activities of the Trust and Panchayat Academy depended solely on Elango, the question of succession is important to resolve.

Also some number of the villagers are employed by external units (Coca-cola) and this may reduce the unity of the village in pursuing an alternative pathway (towards the Network Growth Economy). Hence creating fundamental alternatives in the face of powerful corporate forces seems to be very difficult. There is also a challenge of people's consumerism which took up much of the extra earnings resulting from manufacturing units. It seems the pattern of buying gadgets



Grain Processing Units, Kuthumbakkam

(instead of focusing on basic goods or on saving money) is in general hard to tackle.

7. Conclusion & Key Findings

Despite serious threats to its continued existence as a village, Kuthumbakkam, already widely considered a "model village", can be seen as an experimental laboratory, an example of viable local economy. This is how Elango himself characterises the initiative.

Elango says: "Our rulers plan development from top to bottom. But it has to be vice versa, in the way Kumarappa and Gandhi dreamt about." When you ask him about his vision of the future world, he can give you this answer: "the new world order would become possible with independent and strong self-sustaining village-based local economies. The bargaining power of the villages will be rejuvenated by strong village-centred economies and ecologically sound sustainable growth would be the order of the future."

Looking at the four "alternative" criteria (Box 1) the model has been especially successful in strengthening of the fourth, economic democracy. The localization of production has been a key principle in Kuthumbakkam and larger trade and exchange are built on it. Also the local community have to large extent control over the means of production and the distribution. The focus of Elango as *sarpanch* or later as leader of the Trust has always been on social well-being and justice, the second criterion. We could see significant achievements (housing, employment). Ecological sustainability and sensitivity

towards nature, the first criterion, were not present at the beginning (mid-1990s). But this aspect has gradually entered the initiative, e.g. in the move towards energy saving solutions based on solar power, the use of alternative or recycled construction material, by the general focus on localization (reducing the 'product miles' of things coming into the region), and in neighbouring villages (though not Kuthumbakkam itself), the spread of organic farming.

What can be larger benefits of Kuthumbakkam experiment? The *panchayat* succeeded in completely stopping urban migration. Even some women who married out and came visiting with the husbands, ended up coming back with their families. There is a hope it can have a snowball effect on surrounding villages. The experiments with solar power encourage saving in energy and energy resources, and local control over this important part of human life. Through the

Academy the knowledge and experiences are shared which may lead to a higher confidence among village communities. An empowered and confident village people might start to assert themselves in the local and national affairs. The people governing themselves could truly bring democracy to the grass-roots and take a significant step towards reviving the village economy.

No single village or community can by itself change the larger economic and political structures of exploitation, domination and destruction; it has to work with others as part of larger political movements to do so. But at least even a single settlement can become a locus of resistance and reconstruction, a nursery for experiments and innovations from which others can learn, providing the base for larger linkages towards building critical political mass. Kuthumbakkam successes and failures should be seen in this light.

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