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Statement submitted by Hunger Project, and Neighbourhood Community Network, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

A massive experiment in the State of Kerala, India, points the way to a new political order in terms of global governance from below, to ensure empowerment of women in a wide-reaching and sustainable manner.

The experiment, Kudumbashree, has nearly 300,000 neighbourhood groups of women at risk of poverty, reaching nearly half of the families in the State. The groups are federated at three levels of local governance. Together, these groups of women have a financial outlay bigger than that of any corporate house in the State. Due to such groups, in a State where women were not encouraged to socialize much outside their homes, more women got elected to the local governance body than men, in the last two successive elections.

The experiment that began with neighbourhood groups of poor women gradually opened the way to a new system of citizens' participation as promulgated through the Kerala Institute of Local Administration, integrating not just women and the poor, but every citizen. All citizens can inclusively participate through small-sized neighbourhood assemblies (neighbourhood sabhas) at the base, which link to ward sabhas at the second level, and to Panchayat council at the top.

The fact that this could be done in Kerala, which is bigger in population than 41 countries, gives us reason to think of the possibility of its wider or even global adaptation.

The factor that makes Kerala's programme distinct is neighbourhoodization, supported by factors like smallification, multi-tier federation and convergence.

Unlike self-help groups elsewhere, in Kerala the groups are neighbourhood-based. Territorially organized, they could get everyone involved. This geographical territory-based approach meant also that women at risk of poverty could easily interface with local governance structures as these too are territorially organized. Thus at every level of local governance women had an organized voice – a mechanism – to interact. Especially in developing countries, being neighbourhood-based gives added accessibility and advantage for women, who tend to stay around in neighbourhoods more than men.

The insistence is also on the participating forums being small. The bigger a forum, the more the small voices get drowned and they go powerless.

We need a new political, economic, and social order that builds on such factors (A Brave New World Fit for Children, Neighbourhood Community Network, 2015).

One such dream is represented by neighbourocracy, which is explained as neighbourhood-based sociocracy.

Neighbourocracy envisions a world organized as neighbourhood parliaments of about 30 families each. These serve as neighbourhood governments with ministers to respond to the concerns of the neighbourhood, and to respond on behalf of the neighbourhood to the concerns of the wider world. These neighbourhood parliaments are federated at various governance levels like that of area/ward, local governance, sub-district, district, state, nation, international region, and the world, with ministers at each level. The elections are to be just from one level to the next. The whole process is to be guided by principles of smallness, numerical uniformity, subsidiarity, recallability, convergence, consent-based decision-making, and sociocratic elections.

The principle of smallness is to insist that the forums that start from the neighbourhood level and go up to national, international, and global levels be so small that everyone could sit around and talk without a microphone.

The principle of numerical uniformity follows from the first. If the forums elected are to be small at every level, they can contain only a certain number of representatives from units immediately below. This will lead to a situation where there are no bigger and smaller countries and hence no border wars and hence no war at all and the entire defence money goes for people's well-being.

The principle of subsidiarity insists that whatever could be decided upon at any subsidiary or low or decentralized level should be decided upon at that level, leading to a situation where most of the decisions are made at the base level. This will lead to a situation where everybody is consulted and hence feels recognized and valued.

The principle of recallability, whereby people at any level can call back, representatives elected to the level immediately above, becomes easy because, at every level, forums are small in size. This recallability ensures that people, especially those at the base, hold power not just during the once-in-five year elections but on a day-to-day basis. If they hold the power this way, their grievances cannot remain unaddressed.

The successive governments of Kerala did a great job delegating to the neighbourhood-group federations whatever could be routed through them. This gave them more and more reasons to come together and do things together, and the more the forums came together, the stronger and the more cohesive they became. This approach is represented by the principle of convergence: let every activity, role, and power converge as much as possible at neighbourhood forums and their federations.

When decisions are majority-based, as in democracy, people become divided, and there is a compulsion for the majority to project the minority or the opposition in a bad light. In addition, due to the hugeness of election constituencies, democracy often ends up as the rule of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich. Against this, from the Netherlands emerged sociocracy with its insistence on small circles, double-linking, decision by consent (not consensus), and sociocratic elections. All such decision-making that is based on consent, and every sociocratic election tend to leave groups more united, cohesive, and glued together.

Fortunately, the small-neighbourhood-based approach gains increasing acceptance. States and countries send delegates to Kerala to learn from the experience, and the Kerala government has opened a special training center for such needs.

Again, a network of inclusive neighbourhood children's parliaments, which is becoming increasingly global, follows the above principles. They are being organized in schools and residential neighbourhoods as units of about thirty children. Even when in schools, the units are not on the basis of the classes or grades the children study, but inclusively on the basis of the residential neighbourhoods they come from. Every child here becomes a minister. Seventeen such ministers in each unit of 30 children are for the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. There are schools with as many as 40 units functioning in the same campus, meeting one hour every week, alternatively as territory-based neighbourhood parliament sessions and as theme-based meetings of the various ministries. The children get initiated this way for proactive global citizenship.

All such initiatives give the hope that a new world of governance from below will not be very distant.

Our call to countries and women everywhere is to start organizing your own neighbourhood as small-sized territory-based units. We will soon have a world of women-led empowerment, justice, and equality.