**Contribution to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights submitted by International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

**Good practice of participation**

The article, ***From Food Security to Food Justice*** by Ananya Mukherjee, Professor and Chair of Political Science at York University, Toronto, illustrates a good practice of participation, in the State of Kerala, India, that enables people-living-in-poverty to exercise their rights and responsibilities in improving the quality of life for women and their families  [www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article2848305.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article2848305.ece)

In this article, Ananya tells the story of the research on an experiment, *SanghaKrishi* (group-farming), a part of Kerala State Government’s anti-poverty programme, *Kudumbashree* (prosperity of the family) initiated in 2007[www.kudumbashree.org](http://www.kudumbashree.org).This experiment was seen as a means to enhance local food production. As many as 44,225 collectives of women farmers lease fallow land, rejuvenate it, farm it and then sell the produce or use it for consumption.

*Kudumbashree* is a network of 4 million women mostly below poverty line. *Kudumbashree* is not merely a ‘project’ or a ‘programme’ but a social space where marginalized women can collectively pursue their needs and aspirations. The primary unit of *Kudumbashree* is the Neighbourhood Group (NHG). NHGs, consisting of not more than 20 women, are for an overwhelming majority their first ever space outside home. NHGs are federated into Area Development Societies (ADSs), and these are in turn federated into Community Development Societies (CDSs) at the *panchayat* (local governance) level. Today, there are 213,000 NHGs in Kerala. *Kudumbashree* office-bearers are elected.  A crucial process for its members, these elections help to bring women into politics. And they bring with them a different set of values that can change the face of politics.

The NHG is very different from a self-help group (SHG) in that it is structurally linked to the State (through the institution of local self-government). This ensures that local development reflects the needs and aspirations of communities who are not reduced to be mere “executors” of government programs. What is sought is synergy between democratization and poverty reduction, and this occurs here through the mobilization of poor women’s leadership and solidarity.

This experiment is transforming the socio-political space that women inhabit, and results in three major consequences: First, there is a palpable shift in the role of women in Kerala’s agriculture. Thousands of *Kudumbashree* women - hitherto underpaid agricultural laborers - have abandoned wage work to become independent producers. Many others combine wage works with farming. Second, it has enabled women, in particular women from the marginalized communities, to salvage their dignity and livelihoods amidst immense adversity. The survey of 100 collectives across 14 districts found that 15 per cent of the farmers were *Dalit*s and *Adivasi*s and 32 per cent came from the minority communities. Third, it is producing important consequences for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in Kerala. Given Kerala’s high wages for men, MGNREGS in Kerala has become predominantly a space for women (93 percent of the employment generated has gone to women whereas the national average is 50). One of them said, *“We have created life… and food, which gives life, not just 100 days of manual labour.”*

The above excerpt from the article, ***From Food Security to Food Justice***, underscores the following:

* Participatory forums at the neighbourhood level, small enough for people living in poverty to come together to have an ongoing say in decisions that affect their lives, ensure inclusion and are productive
* Neighbourhood level participatory forums, when federated at various levels, result in collective participation at wider levels lead to increased empowerment.
* Government programmes, when implemented in partnership with people at local level through such federations of neighbourhood forums, result in people-centered development.
* The existing forums for participation - in India, parliamentary constituencies, State legislative assembly constituencies and *gram sabha*s (local governance assemblies) - are not adequate for engaging people-living-in-poverty to have an ongoing effective say in decisions that affect their lives

**Bottom-up, inclusive and accountable governance**

The key issue in the ***Good practice on participation*** is one of governance.

The UN SG’s High level Panel on Global Sustainability too noted that *“Democratic governance and full respect for human rights are prerequisites for empowering people to make sustainable choices.”*

The Report of the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives too has called for “a change in the tone of multilateral governance from one that prescribes solutions and then institutes legal and financial frameworks to implement them or ensure compliance, to one that protects bottom-up governance.”

Bottom-up governance not only refers to the directions of influence from the local to the global. It also calls for more governance space and implementation to be retained at local and sub-national levels. It is to enable, for instance, small farmers and peasant communities to exercise their rights in retaining their seeds, growing nutritious foods without genetically modified organisms, and accessing medicines without paying unaffordable prices set by transnational companies and protected by intellectual property rights.

Bottom-up democratic governance requires not only the strengthening of civil society in governance skill but also a re-focusing and re-structuring of governance institutions and the overcoming of governance gaps at national and global levels.

We recommend that ensuring participation of people living in poverty in decisions that affect their lives requires participatory processes that will

* consider ***Planning-by-People Processes*** such as that of *Kudumbashree* to ensure participation of people-living-in-poverty in decisions that affect their lives
* create enabling environments for the realization of the right to participate which is already enshrined in the international instruments
* strengthen governance skill
* re-focus and restructure governance institutions to overcome related governance gaps at national and global levels.