

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AS TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Lessons from Kerala and Cuba

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ABSTRACT: This article compares the development experiences of two societies — Kerala (a state within India) and Cuba — both widely regarded by development experts as “success stories” in the Global South for their relatively high achievements in general quality of life and social well-being as measured by UN Development Program’s indicators of human development. The author argues that the lessons offered by Kerala and Cuba in rapidly alleviating endemic deprivations and enhancing human development are of enormous significance for developing countries. Indeed their experience is of particular relevance in the context of the structural adjustment programs imposed on southern countries by the Bretton Woods institutions and in the wake of the clear failures of alternative models to reduce hunger and deprivation. Examining the historical trajectory of these two “models” and the transformative practice that produced relatively high human development outcomes, the article identifies some common elements behind their success, highlighting the centrality of public action and organized democratic participation. It also examines some of the major challenges Kerala and Cuba face in the aftermath of globalization and market reforms. Although they have been successful in achieving higher economic growth, Kerala and Cuba now confront problems created by privatization, increasing inequality, and eroding public services that threaten their development models. While the two societies are facing these challenges in different ways and are still sustaining their basic social welfare programs, their experience in meeting these challenges is important for the developing world facing similar challenges.

“Walker, there is no road. The road is made as you walk.” — Antonio Machado, Spanish poet

“To achieve as much as Kerala has done for a population of its size is no mean record in world history.” — Amartya Sen

“With all the authority of hindsight, it is important to analyze and criticize the methods Cuba has chosen to eradicate hunger.... But we should never lose sight of the fact that the Cuban revolution declared, from the outset, that no one should go malnourished. No disappointment in food production, no failed economic take-off, no shock wave from world economic crisis has deterred Cuba from freeing itself from the suffering and shame of a single wasted child or an elderly person ignominiously subsisting on pet food. No other country in this hemisphere, including the United States, can make this claim.”¹

This article compares the development experiences of two societies — Kerala (one of twenty-eight states in India, with a population of 33 million) and Cuba (an island nation with 11 million inhabitants) — both widely regarded by development experts as “success stories” in the Global South for their relatively high achievements in general quality of life and social well-being as measured by the UN Development Program’s (UNDP) indicators of human development (HD). Indeed, they stand out among a small group of countries/regions in the Global South that have succeeded in alleviating, if not eradicating, endemic deprivations and chronic hunger and bringing about significant improvements in education, health, and general social security. Their achievements are all the more significant since these outcomes were the products of development paths that prioritized “human development” and general social security rather than relying on the elusive trickle-down effect of high economic growth, which is the conventional path. Indeed, the most significant breakthroughs, especially in launching and institutionalizing the foundational policies behind the HD achievements, were made during periods of low economic growth, within relatively short periods of time, mostly without the help of foreign aid, advisors, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and with little damage to the environment.²

If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, as the saying goes, there is a lesson here that is counterfactual but of immense human significance. Stated simply: the terrible suffering of one-fifth of the world’s people, the acute hunger of 200 million children under five,³ many dying untimely and painful deaths, is *needless* and can be eliminated without turning the poor countries of the Global South into Western-type industrialized high-consumption societies. The corollary to this is that the continuous toleration of such needless suffering as natural and inevitable is morally reprehensible and should also be considered politi-

1. Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1984, 180.

2. While it is true that Cuba did receive considerable aid and support from the Soviet Bloc of countries, the main point made here is that the policies and institutions behind the HD achievements were largely of indigenous origin and driven by endogenous forces. As will be seen below, Cuba fell back on its own resources to overcome a serious crisis in the wake of the sudden collapse of its Soviet support, and did so with considerable success.

3. Unicef 2007.

cally unacceptable. But what if these “models”⁴ are mere accidents of history and not replicable, or worse, are themselves under strain and may prove to be unsustainable? Clearly both Kerala and Cuba have faced new and major challenges since circa 1990: they both have been negatively impacted by the forces of neoliberal globalization, albeit in different political and economic contexts, and Cuba suffered the loss of its allies and trade partners in the Soviet bloc.

This article examines these issues with a view to determining if and to what extent the experiences of these societies may offer lessons for addressing the issues of poverty, hunger, and endemic deprivation in a world of plenty. This task acquires a particular relevance and urgency as the much publicized initiatives to address these problems such as the *Millennium Development Goals Reports* (MDGs) and *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers* (PRSPs) are showing few signs of success.⁵ Indeed, we have witnessed an increase in poverty and hunger during the period of neoliberal reforms even in high-growth countries.⁶ The cruellest irony of all has been the fate of the very first of the MDGs, the promise of halving the number of the world’s hungry from 850 million to 425 million by 2015. By 2006, a decade and half into the global neoliberal regime and structural adjustments, an additional 250 million had, in fact been added to the ranks of the hungry, whose number now stands above a billion.⁷

This study uses the human development (HD) approach, but from a critical perspective. We believe this approach to be eminently useful for our comparative study. First, it is the HD approach — in the basic sense of measuring a society’s development by human well-being rather than by wealth or economic growth — that has brought Kerala and Cuba (and other similar cases such as Costa Rica and Sri Lanka) to global attention and into the global discourse on development. Second, as we shall see below, HD (the reality not just the term) has been the very foundation of the development path these societies began following long before the UNDP and other mainstream global policy-makers adopted the concept. In fact, the idea behind this approach is an astonishingly simple and universal one, as its foundational theorists, such as Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen, and most of the world’s religious thinkers and philosophers have argued: wealth per se does not produce human well-being or a good soci-

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4. Our use of the term “model” despite considerable controversy about such usage requires a note of explanation. The concept is used here to denote not an exemplar for emulation — although we argue that there are lessons to be learned from these cases — but in the scientific sense of a reference to a specific *pattern* of socioeconomic and political development characterized by such notable features as public action, support-led security, and state policies prioritizing HD, features that are empirically identifiable and amenable to empirical investigation. For more on this see Tharamangalam 2006, 3–4.
 5. Stiglitz 2002; Sachs 2005. The UN’s *Millennium Development Goals Report 2008* states in its midcourse evaluation that the goal of reducing absolute poverty by half is within reach for the world as a whole. It notes that this assessment is based on the success of China, India, and other Asian countries in this respect, and that Africa had made little progress. Even this claim, however, is contested by many; see note 6 below. See United Nations 2008.
 6. The World Bank and other global policy-makers have propagated the idea that high-growth countries such as China and India have lifted millions of people out of poverty. This is at best a half truth and at least in the case of India has been vigorously contested. See, for example, Patnaik 2007; Deaton and Kozel 2005; and Tharamangalam 2009.
 7. Ifpri 2008.



Children play on a dirty mattress in the dump nicknamed Smokey Mountain in Manila, Philippines. 2007. The human development approach (used in this article) provides a “comprehensive concept of development, one that includes human, ethical, social, and even political dimensions.” (Credit: United Methodist Church / Kathy L. Gilbert)

ety.⁸ Third, at least since the appearance of the UNDP’s first *Human Development Report (HDR)* in 1990, the HD approach has presented the most powerful challenge to the global regime of neoliberalism.⁹ This is the case for two reasons: (1) the HD approach provides a far more comprehensive concept of development, one that includes human, ethical, social, and even political dimensions, and (2) it has spawned the influential *HDRs*, which have been effective in acting as a two-pronged tool for assessing the social impact of economic policies, on the one hand, and for advocacy on behalf of the poor and the deprived on the other. The first *HDR* (1990) brought into sharp focus the point that a country’s income does not automatically produce human well-being if measured by indicators of quality of life such as knowledge and a long and healthy life. The same report held up “contrary” examples of such relatively poor countries as Costa Rica and Sri Lanka, which had achieved high HD relative to their

8. See, for example, ul Haq 1995, and the many well-known works of Amartya Sen, especially Sen 1999. For a summary of the approach, see Tharamangalam and Reed 2010 and Deneulin and Shahani eds., 2009. As Karl Polanyi has shown in his classic work (2001) the idea that the economy of a society is a self-regulating system that has an existence in its own independent domain became a dominant one only during the era of capitalism. In all previous social systems, the economy was, and was seen as being, encapsulated or embedded in the broader social, moral, and religious systems of humankind.
9. See Jolly 2004 and Kuonqui 2006. This is regardless of whether it merits to be considered an alternative paradigm as suggested by some of its proponents such as Frances Stewart (2006). For a critique of this view, see Kuonqui (2006), who argues that the approach does not meet the criteria of a new paradigm.

income, highlighting the theme to be examined in this article. At the other end of the spectrum the first and belated *HDR* for the United States¹⁰ highlights some devastating and scandalous HD facts about a development model that privileges individual competitiveness and acquisition of wealth as its foundational ethos rather than social well-being, security, or social justice. The fact that 47 million Americans have no access to health care may be widely recognized, but what may not be equally well known is that Cuba (with per capita GDP of \$6,876) has a better record of child survival than the United States (per capita GDP = \$45,592) or that life expectancy of males in Kerala (per capita GDP = \$2,895) is higher than that of African American males in the United States, or that in the United States itself infant mortality rates (IMR) range from a low of 5.7 for whites to a high of 14 for blacks. It is no wonder that the annual *HDRs* attract immense international media attention; there were 1 million downloads of the 2004 *HDR* within one week of its release.¹¹ Even the World Bank and the IMF have appropriated a good part of the HD discourse and its vocabulary.¹²

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. This introduction is followed by a review of Kerala's and Cuba's achievements. We then examine the pathways Kerala and Cuba have followed, identifying common patterns intrinsic to their HD achievements. Next we discuss some of the challenges Kerala and Cuba face in the wake of globalization and economic reforms. Finally, we conclude by recapitulating the main lessons that can be learned from the two cases and assessing the prospects of their continuing sustainability in the context of the challenges they now face.

1. The Achievements of Kerala and Cuba

The achievements of Kerala and Cuba are well known and well documented.¹³ Kerala's ranking of 72 in the Human Development Index (HDI) in 2005 — against India's ranking of 127 that year — placed it at the top of the medium HD countries,¹⁴ and Cuba's number 51 standing in 2009 placed it among the high HD countries¹⁵ and above all countries in Latin America except much richer Ar-

10. See Burd-Sharps et al. 2008.

11. Kuonqui 2006.

12. Tharamangalam and Reed 2010.

13. Among general works dealing with successful HD models are two good collections that include both Cuba and Kerala, both produced under UN auspices: Mehrotra and Jolly 1997 and Ghai ed. 2000. A third and more recent collection, Sandbrook et al. 2007, restricts its coverage to "social democracy in the global periphery" and covers Kerala, but not Cuba. On Kerala's development experience see also Franke and Chasin 1994; Ramachandran 1998; Heller 1999 and 2007; Oommen 1999, vols. 1 and 2; Tharamangalam 1998a, 1998b, and 2006, among others. On Cuba, see Saney 2004; Sinclair and Thompson 2004; and Uriarte 2002 and 2004.

14. The Human Development Index (HDI) is based on three indicators: (1) longevity, as measured by life expectancy at birth; (2) educational attainment, as measured by a combination of the adult literacy rate (two-thirds weight) and the combined gross primary, secondary, and tertiary enrollment ratio (one-third weight); and (3) standard of living, as measured by GDP per capita (Purchasing Power Parity, that is, GDP per capita converted into U.S. dollars after adjusting for price differences). The UNDP ranks only sovereign nation states. Kerala's ranking of 72 is from Government of Kerala 2006, the latest available for the state at this writing; this is where Kerala would have ranked had it been an independent country.

15. The UNDP classifies countries into three categories of human development: high, medium, and low. Cuba is in the high category.

gentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica. Here we highlight only some notable achievements underlying these rankings before providing a brief description of the historical trajectories that produced these outcomes.

Human Development in Kerala

Kerala entered the new millennium with a literacy rate of 91 percent, life expectancy at birth of around 72 for males and 75 for females (India's, by contrast, is 64 and 65, respectively) and an IMR of 14 (India's = 71). These measures were not only above those of all other Indian states and all Chinese provinces (except Tibet), but placed Kerala in the company of at least middle-level developed countries. In sharp contrast to the Indian record, the male–female gap in HD indicators is relatively small in Kerala — a fact that makes the gap between women in Kerala and India even larger in terms of HD. Kerala is the only state in India with a favorable sex ratio of 1,058 females per 1,000 males, against 933 (females) for India and as low as 861 (females) for Haryana and some of the northern states. Similarly, Kerala's female life expectancy of 75.9 is about fifteen years higher than India's 61.1 and seven years higher than the 68.8 figure for the richest Indian state of Punjab. In fact a female child born in Kerala can expect to live twenty years longer than one born in the largest Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP).¹⁶ Furthermore, Kerala, like Cuba, is a rare example in the Global South of a society reaching the third stage of the demographic transition, the stage of zero population growth. Kerala's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is 1.6, equal to Canada's. And this is without the beneficial influences of urbanization and industrialization, as in the developed North, and without forced sterilization or similar measures as in China.

These achievements have a mutually reinforcing effect. In this respect, the single most remarkable statistic is probably that of literacy, in particular the female literacy rate of 88 (2001), which, directly or indirectly, has influenced several other achievements, most notably the rapid decline in IMR and fertility, but also general health, nutrition, and well-being.¹⁷ There are other indicators of Kerala's high quality of life, some easily measured, others more intangible. Examples of the latter are Kerala's high levels of social mobilization and democratic participation, an exceptionally high readership of newspapers and magazines, a writers' cooperative that may be the world's first and most successful, and an equally pioneering and successful people's science movement. The most intangible indicator of all, perhaps, is the new sense of dignity and self-worth that the formerly oppressed and humiliated sectors of its population possess. Kerala has also stood out among Indian states for its exceptional record in reducing poverty, whether we use the head count index or the human poverty index.¹⁸ Kerala's

16. World Bank 2003, 44.

17. For a discussion of the significance of women's literacy and women's agency in general, see Drèze and Sen's many writings, especially Sen's paper in Tharamangalam 2006, and those in Sen 1999 and Drèze and Sen 2002. See also Jeffrey 1992.

18. Ravallion and Datt 1996; Chelliah and Sudarshan 1999; Kannan 1995; Drèze and Sen 2002.

achievement here is all the more remarkable when we consider that between the 1950s and the 1990s Kerala moved from its position of having the highest head count ratio to one with the lowest head count ratio outside India's north-western region, which consists of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁹ According to World Bank economist Vinod Thomas, Kerala also has the highest elasticity with regard to poverty reduction, i.e., even a small gain in growth translates into a large gain in poverty reduction.²⁰

Finally, it is worth noting that Kerala achieved these gains from an initial status of a poor agrarian society whose lower classes had suffered among the worst forms of caste–class oppression.

Human Development in Cuba

Cuba's human development achievements are even more remarkable than Kerala's and far above Latin America's none-too-enviable record. Cuba's relatively high ranking of 51 in the *HDR* (2009) actually masks its remarkable achievements in HD because of the weight (one-third) the Human Development Index gives to per capita GDP.²¹ (This applies to Kerala as well.) Its GDP per capita rank minus HDI rank is 44, the highest among all countries ranked by the UNDP.²² This means that Cuba has done better than all the countries ranked by the UNDP in translating its income into human development and social well-being.

In addition to its record of universal literacy, high life expectancy, and the lowest IMR (number 7) and TFR (number 6) in Latin America, Cuba is also among the top in the world in some unusual measures of achievements in education and health. A Unesco study published in 1998 ranked Cuba first in mathematics and science among all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.²³ The country's primary school teacher-to-student ratio of twelve is on a par with Sweden's and better than that of most countries. A World Bank report published in 1999 said about Cuba's educational achievement:

[O]utstanding: universal school enrolment and attendance; nearly universal adult literacy; proportional female representation at all levels including higher education; a strong scientific training base, particularly chemistry and medicine; consistent pedagogical quality across widely

19. Drèze and Sen 2002, 99.

20. Thomas 2006.

21. The measurement of income in Cuba is controversial, and has been adjusted to factor in some of the free services and subsidized goods that are made available to all Cubans. This has been done by Cuban economists working in collaboration with and with the support of UNDP experts. Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez (2005) question Cuba's high ranking, but Cuban and UN experts agree on this ranking. (Conversations with Cuban economists, and participants — including a UN expert — in our project workshop in Havana, December 2007.) Based on our research in Cuba, Rushton and Veltmeyer (2008) have argued that in addition to making these adjustments to per capita GDP, it is also necessary to take into account income distribution in order to arrive at a more meaningful HDI.

22. Cuba has actually moved up steadily in the HDI during the 1990s standing at number 52 in 2007–2008.

23. Unesco 1998.



Old man on farm near Pinar del Rio, Cuba, 2009. The World Health Organization has praised Cuba for achieving “the highest healthy life expectancy in the region [Latin America and the Caribbean], at 68.4 years,” near U.S. levels. (Credit: Adam Jones, PhD, Flickr)

dispersed classrooms; equality of basic educational opportunity, even in impoverished areas, both rural and urban.²⁴

Using its new yardstick of “healthy life expectancy,” which measures the number of years a person can be expected to live in full health, the World Health Organization (WHO) praised Cuba for achieving “the highest healthy life expectancy in the region [Latin America and the Caribbean], at 68.4 years, near US levels.”²⁵ No wonder Cuba won praise even from World Bank president James Wolfenson, who, commenting on the newly released *World Development Report, 2001*, told reporters: “Cuba has done a great job on education and health, ... and it does not embarrass me to admit it.”²⁶ And former UN secretary general Kofi

Annan held up Cuba as an example that shows that “even a poor country need not leave its people defenseless against some of life’s worst hardships.”²⁷ Annan made this statement in 2000 when Cuba was still struggling to overcome a major economic and food crisis in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the loss of its only real trade partners and supporters.

Cuba’s success in overcoming a catastrophic economic and humanitarian crisis (after the sudden loss of its trading partners) and sustaining its HD achievements, all while relying on its own resources, must be regarded as one of the most remarkable achievements for a state and society in recent times.²⁸ Analysts claim that the key to Cuba’s success was its ability to mobilize a well-organized and educated population to undertake various innovative and creative measures, including those aimed at attaining self-sufficiency in sustainable forms of food production. Commenting on the rapid recovery of Cuban agriculture, an Oxfam America report stated: “Under the circumstances facing Cuba — the U.S. embargo, loss of trading partners, little international aid, and economic collapse — the agricultural recovery is nothing short of extraordinary.”²⁹

24. Gasperini 2000, executive summary.

25. Quoted in Saney 2004, 35.

26. Lobe 2001.

27. Annan 2000.

28. Koont 2004; Mehrotra and Jolly, eds. 1997; Sinclair and Thomson 2004; Barraclough 2000.

29. Sinclair and Thompson 2004, 48.

While Cuba continues to be vulnerable and the economic and social situation remains far from satisfactory, it has managed to sustain its HD achievements and to substantially increase its food supply within a short period of time. Assessing the country's crisis and reviewing its vulnerability (circa 2000), one observer stated: "[T]he foundations of the Cuban health and nutrition system are strong enough to ensure that the infant-mortality rate and the under-five mortality rate are being maintained — at least so far."³⁰

2. Behind the HD Achievements: Agency and Practice

Why and how did these two societies succeed where so many others have failed? Are their successes attributable to unique conjunctures of historical conditions that are not replicable? The answers to these questions are not easy, and there are contesting interpretations. To be sure, historical and conjunctural factors need to be identified, among them the specific characteristics of colonial interventions, the early development of export economies and commercial agriculture, the development of class forces, and the process of state formation. Our focus here will be on the interventions of social agencies and the specific forces that moved them to act the way they did.

From this perspective we discuss three common patterns in the paths that led Kerala and Cuba to high achievements in human development: (1) the high policy priority given to human development with education and health as its foundation; (2) public action (as Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen use the concept in their work), with its two components of organized social movements that influence state action and an interventionist state that is responsive to the demands of such movements; and (3) a cultural revolution that spawns the process and provides the impetus to "move" state and society to imagine, to hope for the social goods concerned, and consequently to formulate and implement the policies needed to deliver these goods.

Policy Priorities

At the outset it is important to make the point that long before global economists and policy-makers discovered the idea of HD, the transformative project the people of Cuba and Kerala were pursuing was all about human development. As will be discussed below in the section on Cultural Revolution, this project, which large sections of their populations called the "socialist project," had the explicit and stated goal, *ab initio*, of human development — in its classic Enlightenment (and Marxist) and in its more universal sense — of freedom from alienation and oppression, empowerment of the poor and the powerless, and the promotion of social and distributive justice. And this project was pursued independently of its relationship with GDP growth, sometimes at the cost of such growth. The basic inspiration for the transformative project (and the policies it required) came not from economists and technocrats — who played, at

30. Mehrotra 1997, 411.

best, a marginal role — but from social reformers and revolutionaries, and from religious and secular thinkers such as Sri Narayana Guru and Namboothiripad, José Martí and Fidel Castro. It is not accidental, therefore, that both these societies gave high priority to the provisioning of public goods, on the one hand, and to policies required to reduce, if not eradicate, entrenched inequalities, on the other. Beyond education and health, there were specifically pro-poor policies such as the very important public distribution system (on which more below). There were also radical redistributive policies such as land reforms. Since these policies are generally well known and well documented, we shall devote the limited space available here to an analysis of the social and political forces that were behind the formulation and effective implementation of the policies themselves.³¹

Public Action

According to Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, public action has been a critical factor in the human development achievements of Kerala and other similar success stories. In the Drèze and Sen formulation, public action includes both state intervention and popular participation (including political action by mobilized groups). Together these lead to the establishment and effective functioning of a system of “public provisioning” and “support-led security.”³² Kerala and Cuba, located in two different continents, with unique historical and cultural contexts and two different political systems, nevertheless exemplify the critical role of public action in bringing about their impressive human development outcomes. But the concept of public action is more complex than it first appears; complex issues of the nature and role of the state and state actors and the nature and role of social forces and social actors must be considered. The state, after all, is a product of and embedded in society, while society and social forces (popular participation) may be molded and even manipulated by the state. For purposes of our analysis the two components of public action, the state and the social forces, are analytically separated in the sections below, followed by a brief third section examining the relationship between the two. In engaging with the voluminous literature and the many debates on each of these issues, we will be selective and brief, keeping our focus on the critical role of public action in human development and poverty alleviation.

Why the State Matters

The modern debate about the state can be said to have begun with the classical works of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber in the context of the rise of modernity and capitalism, the former two focusing more on the social forces with only Weber treating the state and its bureaucracy as relatively autonomous rational actors. The more recent debate has focused on the state with respect to the is-

31. Many of the works on Kerala and Cuba listed in this article also deal with these policies. See especially those listed in note 13 above.

32. Drèze and Sen develop the concept in many of their works. See especially Drèze and Sen 1989 and 1998, and Sen 1999.

sues of development, democracy, inequality, and poverty reduction, much of it specifically in relation to the poor countries in the Global South.³³

The theory that still enjoys hegemonic status is neoliberalism (notwithstanding rumors of its demise in many parts of the world), especially as powerful international players have used neoliberal policies to reshape economies and societies all over the world. As is well known, neoliberals see the state as an obstacle to economic growth and freedom (by which they generally mean the market). They prefer to have markets as well as NGOs play a greater role in the economy while downsizing the role of the state. While motley groups of left intellectuals and nationalists resist neoliberal hegemony, the antistate position receives support from a different quarter in the form of some globalization theorists of the post-structural, postmodern vintage, who see the state being superseded by global forces. They favor global civil society stepping into the vacuum created by the declining state. Yet there is strong historical and empirical evidence, buttressed by sound theoretical arguments, to suggest that all forms of general human well-being that people enjoy in a society — be it peace and security, freedom from violence and crime, freedom from famine and malnutrition, economic development and scientific progress — have been associated with good public institutions at the center of which is the state, relatively strong, well-organized, well-governed, and democratic, and enjoying a high degree of legitimacy and social consensus.³⁴ For purposes of our discussion what needs to be highlighted is the fact that every observable society with high HD, including those in East Asia, has had a history of some form of state-led development.³⁵ Furthermore, it can also be argued that effective states in modern times with purposive and programmatic pro-poor policies have no famines, a conclusion Amartya Sen has forcefully brought out in his studies on famines. Stated simply,

33. Important contributions here include the seminal work of Barrington Moore Jr. on the social origins of democracy and dictatorship (Moore 1966); Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (1985) on “bringing the state back in” (reacting against the radical polycentrism of some prevalent perspectives such as the world systems theory, but also an early antidote to the neoliberal celebration of the down-sized state); Migdal, Kohli, and Shue 1994, on the relationship between state and society with the state-in-society approach; Houtzager and Moore 2003, which specifically addresses the issue of the politics of inclusion. Atul Kohli’s many works (2004, 2009, and undated) include extensive discussion on India. Kohli (undated) and Harris 2003 specifically address the issue of poverty reduction, arguing that even within India state regimes differ significantly in this respect — not surprisingly, states governed by well-organized, left-of-center parties do much better in this respect.

34. Sen 1999; Nayyar 2009; Levitt 2010; Polanyi 2001; Stiglitz 2001; Kohli undated; Kohli 2004; Harris 2003; Herring 2003, among others.

35. This has been the case even in the capitalist countries of Western Europe and East Asia, and even the United States. As Sen has noted in several of his writings, all these countries maintained high levels of public provisioning and investments in education, health, social security, and public services. Significantly, the first *HDR* noted that Malaysia was able to achieve steady improvements in HD despite its poor income distribution because other social goods were distributed more equitably as a result of well-structured public (*meso*) policies implemented by the state. (Malaysia spent 8 percent of its GDP on social programs between 1973 and 1981 [UNDP 1990, 47]). The critical role of the state has once again been highlighted in the wake of the recent food and financial crises and the clear failures of neoliberal policies. Significantly, neoliberal orthodoxy did not prevent any of the world’s major states from intervening heavily to rescue their failing economies during the recent global financial crisis.



"The Angel of Poverty and Famine." Amartya Sen contends that since famines are "so easily preventable" no modern state that guarantees food "entitlements" to its citizens will allow a famine to take place. (Image credit: Kevin Rooke.

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the argument is that since famines are "so easily preventable" no modern state that guarantees food "entitlements" to its citizens will allow a famine to take place. Not surprisingly, the worst famines are products of colonial and nondemocratic dictatorships or failed states. Sen says that "it is hard to think that famines like those in Ireland in the 1840s would have been at all allowed to occur in Britain."³⁶ Even within India, famines and endemic poverty vary substantially across its states (with Kerala at the benign end) and the most important variable here is the type of regime.³⁷

In both Kerala and Cuba the state was "captured" or constructed through popular struggles and/or revolution by coalitions of underprivileged classes and reconstituted to act on their

behalf. The regimes that came to power on the waves of such popular movements enjoyed the capacity and the legitimacy to act boldly to transform entrenched class and power structures and to create the preconditions for democratic participation by the masses of the population. Agrarian reforms are notoriously difficult to implement, but critical in this process. While Cuba's reforms eliminated the landed elites, Kerala's more modest reforms were still the most radical for any state in India and did succeed in neutralizing the power of predatory landlords. This may be an important factor in understanding the contrast between the high levels of democratic participation in Kerala and the clientelist politics of many north Indian states where powerful landlords continue to be in control.³⁸ The success of these states in preventing famines, rapidly reducing poverty, and making public provision for education, health, food, and social security must be attributed to their effective, purposeful, and programmatic pursuit of pro-welfare and pro-poor policies aimed at empowering and capacitating the poor — even at the risk of alienating some powerful classes. Among the noteworthy programs implemented by state actors in situations of crisis, the one that stands out is the response of the Cuban state to the system-threatening crisis in the aftermath of the sudden collapse of Cuba's ma-

36. Sen 1999, 174.

37. Harris 2003; Kohli undated.

38. Herring 1983, 2003; Kohli undated.