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# Localizing sustainable development goals (SDGs) through decentralized governance: Insights from Kerala, India

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## CITATION

Nair MS, Abhirami A. (2024). Localizing sustainable development goals (SDGs) through decentralized governance: Insights from Kerala, India. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*. 8(16): 10339. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd10339>

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## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 14 November 2024  
Accepted: 10 December 2024  
Available online: 24 December 2024

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**Abstract:** Localization is globally accepted as the strategy towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this article, we put forth the South Indian state of Kerala as a true executor of the localization of SDGs owing to her foundational framework of decentralized governance. We attempt to understand how the course of decentralization acts as a development trajectory and how it has paved the way for the effective assimilation of localization principles post-2015 by reviewing the state documents based on the framework propounded by the United Nations. We theorize that the well-established decentralization mechanism, with delegated institutions and functions thereof, encompasses overlapping mandates with the SDGs. Further, through the tools of development plan formulation, good governance, and community participation at decentralized levels, Kerala could easily adapt to localization, concocting output through innovative measures of convergence, monitoring, and incentivization carried out through the pre-existing platforms and processes. The article proves that constant and concerted efforts undertaken by Kerala through her meticulous and action-oriented decentralized system aided the localization of SDGs and provides an answer to the remarkable feat that the state has achieved through the consecutive four times achievements in the state scores of SDG India Index.

**Keywords:** localization; sustainable development goals; decentralization; participatory planning; Kerala

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## 1. Introduction

Since the declaration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, nations across the globe have devised and implemented diverse strategies towards ‘peace and prosperity for people and planet’ (United Nations, 2017). The seventeen SDGs represent the modern-day testament to tackling the multidimensional crises the world faces. They are an urgent call for action by all countries in a global partnership to end poverty, transform all lives, and protect the planet (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). Before the SDGs, the unanimous adoption of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that prioritised key development progress in terms of eight goals, from improving lives to developing a universal partnership for development, to be attained by 2015, was a milestone that united global policymakers towards setting objectives for sustainable development (United Nations, 2000). However, MDGs had inevitable letdowns as they were based on a set of territorially undifferentiated policies to be operated through national governments, and the lack of grassroots consultations and community ownership failed to create the desired impact on the set goals (Hulme and Scott, 2010; Reddy, 2016). This gave the term ‘localization’ a global stage, which resulted in identifying the local governments as the torchbearers of global development, in contrast to the siloed approach of the MDGs.

The localization process takes subnational and regional contexts into account and relates both to how the SDGs can provide a framework for local development policy and how local governments can support the attainment of SDGs through a bottom-up approach (Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, 2016). Hence, the base of the rule of law and good governance is infused in the implementation of all the SDGs, and SDG 16 is specifically added to the “promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provision of access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The institution of SDG 16 itself confirms the global recognition of the necessity to transform the multi-level governance structures as a prerequisite to transforming the world. This induces the notion of the necessity for organisations that facilitate strong and immediate interactions among authorities, institutions, and citizens if SDGs are to be attained (Biggeri, 2021). It is only through the effective integration of the principles of SDGs into the development mandates of the institutions at all levels and the promotion of cross-sector collaborations that the success of multilevel governance in attaining SDGs is ensured (Oosterhof, 2018). Decentralization is widely accepted as a multilevel governance reform that could effectively deliver public services through simultaneous interventions to empower intergovernmental systems, local institutions, civil society, and the public sector (World Bank, 2021). Decentralization further stipulates effective management of action plans, improved feedback, and circulation of ideas based on both equity and efficiency arguments, which becomes central in the facilitation of localization through regional and local governments (Arcidiacono and Torrisi, 2022). Hence, for facilitating sustainable development, localization of SDGs through decentralized governments is of utmost importance since these structures work closely with citizens and local communities. This proximity helps derive prompt responses in terms of conceptual thinking, policies, and resourcing to the challenges intrinsically linked to development goals such as poverty eradication, food security, and health (Kerala Institute for Local Administration, 2023; Reddy, 2016; Slack, 2015).

Localization of SDGs is being adopted across the world, as evident from the increasing documents of Voluntary National, Subnational, and Local Reviews, where the plurality of actors fostering local ownership and catalysing opportunities for joint achievements are reflected on a global landscape (Bilsky et al., 2021; Narang Suri et al., 2021). Being home to seventeen per cent of the world’s population, the impact of the localization policies undertaken in India has an incomparable momentum in the world’s sustainable development landscape. As per the latest Sustainable Development Report, India ranks 112 among 166 nations, with an SDG index score of 63.4, less than the regional average of 67.2, indicating comparatively slower transformation (García-Escribano et al., 2021). In facilitating sustainable development in India, localization through local and subnational governments is of utmost importance (NITI Aayog, 2022). Identifying the subnational governments as the lynchpin in attaining the SDGs, the NITI Aayog set up a dashboard wherein the progress of state governments in attaining the national indicators is tracked. The SDG India Index, based on 17 SDGs and 115 priority indicators, computes the score of subnational governments and helps compare against the national target value of each goal and thus becomes an advocacy tool driving competition and motivating local

action for the attainment of SDGs (NITI Aayog, 2018). Four editions of the SDG India Index have been published, and the south Indian state of Kerala stands first among the twenty-eight states in India in all four editions.

Kerala's legacy as a development model has been widely acknowledged across the globe since the late 1970s for bringing high levels of social development and improved living conditions despite low per capita income. This success is mainly attributable to public action, encompassing both progressive state interventions and popular movements (Amin, 1991; Franke and Chasin, 1993; Morris and McAlpin, 1982; Ratcliffe, 1978; Ramachandran, 1997; Véron, 2001). The first democratic government in Kerala (1957-59) identified the possibility of the developmental potential of decentralization and envisioned ensuring the participation of all sections of society in local governance. Kerala legitimised decentralized governance by bequeathing constitutional status to Rural Local Bodies through the Kerala Panchayati Raj (KPR) Act of 1994, concurrent with the 73rd amendment of the Indian Constitution. This practice befitted a foundational framework in Kerala's development strategy. With this, a "new Kerala model" emerged—one that envisaged integrating development goals into policy-making and adopting a community-based strategy for sustainable development. This new policy approach comprises decentralized administration, participatory planning combining productive and environmental objectives, and collaboration among the state, NGOs, and civic movements (Véron, 2001). Once the SDGs were announced, this decentralization process provided avenues to utilise citizens' direct involvement in the planning and budget-making method through local governance. It provided an enabling framework for SDG localization in the state. Given this context, we hypothesise that Kerala's achievement of SDGs stems from the proficient localization enabled by the well-developed decentralized governance system and its ancillary mechanisms. Since the declaration of SDGs, Kerala has initiated specific interventions by creating a specialised organisational system, having distinctly delegated functions, promptly monitored by upper hierarchies, and engaged by the civil society towards incorporating the global development goals in a localised frame. Thus, secondly, we hypothesise that these specific initiatives adopted by Kerala post-2015 could well be assimilated because of the existing decentralized governance structures. Hence, the purpose of the study is to analyse how the decentralized system of governance prevalent in Kerala has cemented the foundation for the effective localization of SDGs. The article also examines the initiatives the state has brought in for localization of SDGs post-2015 and how the existing system of decentralized governance helped in assimilating these changes smoothly.

## **2. Framework, materials and methods**

UNDP defines localization as the process of achieving global, national, and subnational SDGs and targets by defining, implementing, and monitoring strategies at the local level (United Nations Development Group, 2014a). This places those local governments, which are at the coalface of service delivery and have proximity to local communities, as the catalyst of change (Reddy, 2016). Nevertheless, SDG localization requires concrete mechanisms, tools, innovations, platforms, and processes to translate

the development agenda effectively into results at the local level (United Nations Development Group, 2014b). The study considers Kerala’s decentralized governance structure as a concrete mechanism and attempts to identify the tools, innovations, platforms, and processes enabled by this mechanism and their interactions that have aided her in being the forerunner in SDG localization.

Decentralized administrative structure in Kerala through the KPR Act has a three-tier classification with Village Panchayats (constitutionally designated as Grama Panchayats (GPs)) at the grassroots level, Block Panchayats (BPs) at the intermediate level, and District Panchayats (DPs) at the top level. Each of these tiers is empowered with an expanded array of functions, functionaries, and funds, enabling them to act as units of local governance (Kerala Panchayati Raj Act, 1994). The transference of institutions, posts, and responsibilities to the first tier of Local Self-Government (LSG), the Grama Panchayats, is documented and the relations with SDGs are explored since they are the closest rung of administration that lie close to the people. The GPs help facilitate the developmental initiatives of the upper tiers by translating them into action by engaging the population right from the planning stage. Thus, GPs are the true representatives of people-centric administration in the three-tier governance system.

After identifying the decentralized system of governance as the mechanism for the effective localization of SDGs and relating the functions of the GPs with SDGs, a thorough review of the KPR Act 1994 and government orders and circulars in this regard is done to identify the tools, innovations, platforms, and process enabled by decentralized governance that has emerged as enabling factors of impactful localization of development goals. These are identified in **Figure 1**, and a detailed analysis of how these are enshrined in the first tier of decentralized governance of the state of Kerala is attempted.

Mechanism	Tools	Innovations	Platforms	Process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Decentralised System</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Development Plans</li> <li>•Good Governance</li> <li>•Social Capital Formation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Convergence</li> <li>•Monitoring</li> <li>•Incentivisation</li> <li>•Geographic Information System (GIS) based resource layers</li> <li>•Accreditation</li> <li>•eGramSwaraj</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assemblies (<i>Sabhas</i>) of the electorate</li> <li>•Standing Committees</li> <li>•Development Seminars</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Identification</li> <li>•Consolidation</li> <li>•Projectisation</li> <li>•Technical Vetting</li> <li>•Approval</li> <li>•Implementation</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** Framework-localization of SDGs: Enabling factors.

To understand the initiatives the state has implemented for the localization of SDGs post-2015 and the role of the existing decentralized governance system in assimilating these changes smoothly, an extensive examination is conducted. This includes analyzing the Vision Document of the State, Government Orders amending Rules of Business of the State, Circulars, Mission Statements and Guidelines (in relation to the attainment of SDGs). These documents were obtained from the SDG Cell of the state government, and the open-access state legislature repository. The dedicated organizations for SDG localization, the departments identified as nodal departments for each SDG, and the themes mapped relating to SDGs are appraised.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### **3.1. Cementing the foundation for localization of development goals in the pre-SDG period**

##### **3.1.1. Decentralization as an enabling mechanism for localization of SDGs in GPs**

The constitutional empowering of the local governance structures through delegating 29 administrative functions and the concurrent passing of the KPR Act followed by the local elections at the grama, block, and district levels (in 1995) in Kerala envisaged a new domain of the LSGs. The Legislature has defined the role of the first tier, the Grama Panchayats, as a crucial component of local governance. It is the duty of the GPs to render services to the inhabitants of the area in respect of the matters enumerated as mandatory functions in the Third Schedule (Kerala Panchayati Raj Act, 1994). The GPs shall have exclusive power to prepare and implement schemes relating thereto for economic development and social justice. GPs in Kerala perform several mandatory functions, including issuing licenses for starting enterprises and giving permits for construction activities. Secondly, GPs provide several civic functions to society, such as the disposal of solid waste, cleaning of public markets, prevention of infectious diseases, provision of public comfort stations and slaughterhouses, protection of drinking water, and wastewater removal. Thirdly, GPs provide basic infrastructure, including minor irrigation facilities, construction and maintenance of roads, and canal protection. Analyzing the functions of the first tier, it is clear that while the civic and infrastructural functions aim to improve basic living necessities for the community. Meanwhile, the mandatory services fulfil the legal necessities of the citizens, making the GPs an effective intervention locus for bolstering development.

GPs act as the facilitators of rural development, and the responsibilities transferred in this regard (**Table 1**) are relatable to the SDGs. An attempt is made here to tag the subjects based on the primary impacts it produces on SDGs. The responsibilities transferred under the subjects of agriculture and animal husbandry are directly enabling SDG 2 (Zero hunger) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth). By inducing water conservation through Minor Irrigation, SDG 2 and SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation) are improved. The transfer of fisheries has a direct bearing on SDG 14 (Life below Water) and social forestry on SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Through the transfer of small-scale industries, the GPs can take action on SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Housing, social welfare, poverty alleviation, public distribution system, and SC/ST development constitute items that support the marginalized population from poverty, thus developing indicators of SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) is improved by ensuring water supply, and SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) is improved through proper dissemination of Electricity and Energy. The primary education system of the state is governed by the GPs, which makes them responsible for the literacy of the population, thus ensuring the objectives of SDG 4 (Quality Education) are met. Through public works and

natural calamities relief, Sustainable Communities are ensured (SDG 11). Through the management of Family Health Centers, attached dispensaries and other functions, the GPs work on SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being). Through dispensing all these functions which have several interlinkages, the GPs serve as a strong institution that strives for the development of the population (SDG 16). Thus, the GPs stand as the providers of basic functions tailor-made to the development needs of their population. To make this practicable, respective institutions and administrative posts have also been transferred to Grama Panchayats via the KPR Act.

**Table 1.** Responsibilities transferred to grama panchayats.

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Agriculture	Cultivation of marginal lands and wastelands. Production of organic manure. Optimum land utilisation and soil conservation. Promotion of horticulture and vegetable cultivation. Farm mechanisation. Promotion of cooperative and group farming. Seed production. Organising self-help groups. Fodder development. Plant protection. Management of Agriculture Offices.
Animal Husbandry	Cattle improvement programs. Running of veterinary dispensaries. Dairy farming, bee-keeping, goat rearing, piggery development, poultry farming, and rabbit rearing. Preventive animal health programs and prevention of cruelty. Control of animal-origin diseases. Fertility improvement programs.
Minor Irrigation	All minor and micro irrigation schemes within the GP area. Water conservation.
Fisheries	Development of pond and freshwater fisheries. Mariculture. Brackish water fish culture. Fish production and distribution. Fish marketing assistance. Distribution of fishing implements. Welfare schemes for fishermen. Provision of basic services for fishermen's families.
Social Forestry	Raising fuel, fodder, and fruit trees. Afforestation of wastelands. Campaigns for environmental awareness and tree planting.
Small Scale Industries	Promotion of handicrafts, traditional industries, mini industries, cottage industries, and Grama industries.
Housing	Identification of homeless people. Implementation of shelter upgradation and rural housing programs.
Water Supply	Running and setting up of water supply schemes.
Electricity & Energy	Street lighting. Literacy programs. Promotion of biogas.
Education	Management of Government's Pre-Primary Schools. Literacy programs.
Public Works	Construction and maintenance of buildings and village roads.
Public Health & Sanitation	Management of family health centres, sub-centres, dispensaries, maternity homes, and child welfare centres. Immunisation and preventive measures. Family Welfare Sanitation.
Social Welfare	Pensions to handicapped, destitute, agricultural labourers, and widows. Group insurance scheme for the poor. Distribution of unemployment assistance.
Poverty Alleviation	Identification and provision of group employment and self-employment for the poor.
SC/ST Development	Beneficiary-oriented schemes. Manage nursery schools and higher education assistance for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) students. Habitat assistance and discretionary assistance to those in need.
Sports and Cultural Affairs	Construction of playgrounds.
Public Distribution System	Remedial measures against complaints regarding the Public Distribution System. General guidance and supervision of fair price shops and other public distribution centres.
Natural Calamities Relief	Organisation of relief works and management of relief centres.
Co-operatives	Payment of Government grants and subsidies and organisation of co-operatives.

Source: State Planning Board, 2002.

Along with the transference of functions and functionaries, adequate funds are allotted to the local governments for effectively performing their dedicated functions. In this context, what is striking in Kerala's decentralization model is the channels of funding made possible for the GPs through effective fiscal decentralization (Khan, 2016; Oommen, 2021). Kerala has exhibited the components of a sound system of fiscal decentralization, including the freedom to prepare budgets, the power to fix, levy, and collect taxes, the power to allot and spend money for various purposes, formula-driven resource transfer from higher to lower governments, and power to borrow money (Franke and Chasin, 2000; Hari, 2022; Oommen et al., 2017; Thomas, 2016). The sources of funds for the local governments come as grants in aid from the state government in terms of development expenditure funds, state-sponsored schemes, funds for maintenance expenditures, and general-purpose funds. Grants in aid are also derived from the central government in the form of centrally sponsored schemes. Loans, own funds, and other receipts are also forms of fund receipt for the GPs. Thus, as specified above, decentralization acts as a mechanism for effectively localizing development goals through the well-defined and demarcated assignment of functionaries, functions, and funds to the local tiers.

### **3.1.2. Tools enabled by decentralization facilitating localization of SDGs-development plans, good governance, social capital creation**

Effective localization is key to attaining the SDGs. Development plans, combined with the benefits of good governance and effective social capital creation, are prominent tools enabled by decentralization in the state.

#### **a) Development Plans**

The LSGs in Kerala are elevated in the spectrum of development agenda, with the institutional capacity assigned with the mandate to prepare Development Plans. The Development Plans are the instruments that bridge the gap between the policies implemented and the required policies and ensure that popular opinions and needs are accounted for in the development agenda (Kannan and Pillai, 2005; Sharma, 2003). Development Plans also reflect participatory planning, where the entire community can participate in the planning process and feel ownership of the plan (Issac and Harilal, 1997; Ramachandran, 2018). During the first People's Plan Campaign of August 1996, the Kerala State Planning Board trained around a thousand voluntary resource persons to assist local bodies in preparing their plans. Grama Sabha (Village Assembly) meetings were convened across all the LSGs in Kerala, where people expressed their felt needs and discussed their local-level problems (Franke and Chasin, 2000; Tharakan, 2005). Participatory and rapid rural appraisals were also done to prepare plans, which were later presented in development seminars. Based on these general reports, sectoral task forces comprising local officials from relevant line departments, voluntary experts, and resource persons drafted project proposals reflecting the developmental needs of the locality, including water, sanitation, agriculture, industry, poverty alleviation, and housing (Issac and Franke, 2000). The local plan document of Grama Panchayats (Grama Panchayat Development Plan-GDPD) was drafted based on these project proposals and later presented and approved in Village Assemblies. With Kerala's People's Plan Campaign, acceptability for comprehensive development plans capturing local needs, tapping local potential, facilitating enhanced local

resource mobilization, and promoting democracy and local ownership got embedded in the system of governance (Gregory, 2008). Over these years of decentralized governance regimes, Kerala has ensured that the preparation of GPDP is done through a collaborative process that involves full convergence with schemes of all related Central Ministries/Line Departments. Such an elaborate and well-structured planning process, aided by prioritization and convergence strategies, provides an opportunity for the integration of SDGs due to the overlapping mandates of local-level development plans and SDGs. This integration enables the development of rural areas in alignment with national and global priorities (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2018). These development plans, necessitating the active participation of the community both in formulation and implementation, are nonpareil in the localization domain, as they facilitate strategies for reaching the furthest behind first.

b) Good Governance

Good governance aims at the ethos of a cohesive and responsible democratic society that provides moral legitimacy, apart from constitutional validity and credibility to the goals as well as instrumentalities of government (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998; World Bank, 1992). For the effective, equitable, responsive, and robust application of Good Governance, the six principles of participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus-oriented, equity and inclusiveness, and accountability need to be ensured in the LSGs. Through the participatory democracy ensured by the decentralized governance structures kept in place by the acts and rules, democratically debated decisions being reflected in development plans and actions, the maintenance of dignity, accountability, and consensus building is guaranteed (Mohanani, 2005; Osmani, 2008). The open platforms of decentralization ensure transparency and accountability, further supported by the Right to Information Act, the conduct of the social audit, and the release of annual reports and beneficiary lists by the concerned institutions (Boex and Simatupang, 2015). The principle of responsiveness is of greater importance, as Kerala's decentralized system requires institutions to be responsive to the demands of the general public in a reasonable timeframe. Similarly, institutions produce outcomes that best suit societal needs by ensuring sustainable utilization of resources, resonating with the equity and inclusiveness principle. The localized policy diffusion, brought about over the years in Kerala, conforming to the principles of good governance and combining it with the initiative of formulating development plans, is the decisive tool for the attainment of SDGs.

c) Social Capital

The emergence of SDGs at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was combined with the call for community-based strategy in such a manner that the formation of social capital was stated as a tool for achieving the objective (Annan-Aggrey et al., 2022; Henfrey et al., 2023). In a developing economy like Kerala, mobilizing social capital through community-building activities sustained by groups and networks is at the center stage of generating community participation (Bandyopadhyay, 1997; Bhuiyan, 2011). The Beneficiary Committees formed to prevent leakages in public construction, Kudumbashree (Women Self Help Groups (SHGs)) instituted for developing the locality through empowering women, and Karshika Karmasenas (Agriculture Technicians) for developing agricultural practices



in the locality are some of the examples of effective networks working in the state (John and Chathukulam, 2002). These groups are important agencies that help aid development plans at the local levels, from the identification of causes to sustaining the solutions.

### **3.1.3. Innovations**

Innovations are brought about by local governments to attain sustainable development. This emanates from the principle that innovations enable more inclusive societies (Weaver et al., 2017). Kerala is a forerunner among other Indian states in this aspect as the state has been working on perfecting the decentralization innovations such as convergences, monitoring bodies and incentivisation right from the adoption of the decentralized system.

Convergence is enshrined in the constitution through cooperative federalism, and Kerala has been working by inducing centre-state relations through program, project, and scheme implementations and underlying budget utilization (Heller, 2008). Convergence is also facilitated via multi-stakeholders through the projects and funds of line departments, being integrated with sub-plans of different tiers of local government, and finally, appropriating convergence from SHGs activities (Chakraborty, 2009; George, 2006). Effective monitoring systems to oversee the practices were also in place such that each panchayat had relevant standing committees, and each program had monitoring mechanisms in the form of respective committees. Rather than these stipulated monitoring systems, the population was made aware of their role in governance and has been partaking in this process since the inception of participatory planning in the state. Incentivization in the form of the Swaraj Trophy for the best-performing Grama, Block, and District Panchayats has been in practice in the state since the 1990s, encouraging the local governments to engage in healthy competition. Thus, for efficacious decentralization, the state had been delving into varied innovations way before the localization of SDGs came into the limelight. Even the relatively new innovations specific to localization declared by the Central Government, such as GIS-based resource layers and accreditation, have been in practice in the state way before (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2018). It is to be highlighted that Kerala has had Sulekha-LSG Plan Monitoring Software since 2012, which has been instrumental in monitoring nearly two lakh decentralized plan projects of local governments in the state. This system helped Kerala to transition easily to the framework of eGramSwaraj online portal, which now monitors GPDPs. These pre-established frameworks enabled the state to adapt to new innovations proposed for localization, such as developing dashboards for panchayats, geotagging of projects, and ISO certification process.

### **3.1.4. Platforms**

The platforms enabled by decentralization, identified as the Electorate Assemblies, Standing Committees, and Development Seminars, are the basis of participatory planning that transforms the voice of the unheard into priority areas in the development plans (Mathew and Mathew, 2003). The Electorate Assemblies of the GPs constitute Village Assemblies and also include Ward, Neighborhood, Mahila (women), and Bal (child) Assemblies as per the necessities of the GP.

The Standing Committees working at the local governments are the change agents that discuss, ideate, and propose the pathways to undertake. According to section 162A of the KPR Act, 1994, the GPs are mandated to have three standing committees for Finance, Development, and Welfare (Kerala Panchayati Raj Act, 1994).

The Development Seminars are organized at three tiers, guided by a group of trained local resource persons, elected local government representatives, and government officials, facilitating discussions to suggest action to address the identified development priorities (Jain and Polman, 2003). The participants are given reports on the socio-economic status of the panchayats to identify gaps, compare them, and assess the availability of resources to fund development.

### **3.1.5. Processes**

The localization process is carried out in Kerala by need formalization through the platform enabled by Village Assemblies (Issac and Franke, 2000). These are then consolidated, projected, and technically vetted. After that, they are submitted to the District Planning Office, where they are finalized and reverted to the preliminary locality as custom projects and monitored to ensure proper implementation. This cycle has historically been set into the development landscape of Kerala, which has led to successful localization in the state.

Effective localization depends upon the strength of the decentralized governance system and how the development plans, as tools, capture the local needs. This is achieved through the assimilation of good governance principles, instigated through the innovations listed, as well as the enabling platforms to voice the poorest of the poor, all befitted in the transformative process. These platforms, mechanisms, tools, and processes have already been established in Kerala. Popular participation is ensured through the designated platforms of assemblies, standing committees and development seminars, resulting in monitoring and convergence of bodies as necessary. This monitoring is ensured in the localization process of development goals right from the identification to the implementation stage, instilling that all the factors are to be inter-reliant for the effective deliverance of the decentralized system. A decisive factor towards effective localization is community participation, and with the history of the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, this was realized in advance, sowing seeds for localization. Thus, it is evident from the development activities undertaken in the state that the elements of localization of development goals were prevalent in the state, owing to her saga of people-centric decentralized development.

### **3.2. Assimilating SDGs to the decentralized governance system of Kerala post-SDG announcement**

With the announcement of SDGs and their localization in the country, Kerala upheld her forerunner status in SDG scores by adopting proper and systemic steps to fast forward to the goal. Incorporating global development goals in a localized frame requires a specialized organizational system, having distinctly delegated functions monitored promptly by upper hierarchies and properly integrating the goals into existing state and local agendas. Kerala has made efforts at systematically localizing SDGs post-2015 and we try to examine the initiatives and analyze how the existing decentralized governance structure helped easily assimilate this.

### **3.2.1. Designating organizations responsible for SDG localization in Kerala**

The United Nations Development Group identified that to mainstream the SDGs, the creation of vertical and horizontal institutional arrangements for better coordination and policy coherence is essential (Smoke and Nixon, 2016). The Government of Kerala designated the Programmer Implementation Evaluation and Monitoring Department (PIE&MD) as the state nodal department for the implementation of SDGs, and for each goal, separate nodal administrative departments are assigned. A State Level Steering Committee (SLSC) was formed in 2017, with primarily the advisory function in implementation, to discuss strategies and action plans and suggest appropriate actions to be taken at the level of the Chief Minister or Council of Ministers (Government of Kerala, 2017a; Government of Kerala, 2017b). A technical support group, the SDG Monitoring Group, was also set up in 2017 to sort out issues in the implementation of SDGs in connection with data management and real-time monitoring systems raised by the departments (Government of Kerala, 2017c). Under the PIE&MD, an SDG Cell was constituted to facilitate the smooth implementation and monitoring of SDGs in the state by extending all technical assistance needed (Government of Kerala, 2018). The cell coordinates and liaises with the stakeholders and implementing departments, documenting all the activities in the state related to SDGs, and preparing status reports. It also maintains data, and researches the best practices of other states, and provides inputs to improve the implementation of SDGs in Kerala effectively (Government of Kerala, 2022a). The Kerala State Planning Board (KSPB), being the strategic partner, ensures the integration of SDGs and thereby modulation of the schemes in the Annual Plans and Five-year Plans of the state, evaluates the effectiveness through physical and financial progress made by schemes/programs of each department in attaining SDGs, and supports PIE&MD in the preparation of policy documents. Department of Economics and Statistics (DES) is designated as the data partner responsible for extending data support to PIE&MD by ensuring the timely flow of data from the institutional structures to the dashboard, rendering capacity-building support to PIE&MD through the State Academy on Statistical Administration, generating and maintaining quality data, developing a centralized data management system, suggesting measures to improve coverage by identifying gaps in the availability of data, and finally modifying data collection in line with the SDGs. Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) has been designated as the capacity-building and localization partner. They are to perform this role by developing strategies and action plans for localization, supporting PIE&MD in initiatives about localization, coordinating with all training institutes in the state and arranging programs for officials, elected representatives, and non-officials engaged with the implementation of SDGs, assisting PIE&MD in developing modules, stakeholder consultations, workshops, seminars, supporting DES in developing data management system and dashboard and, finally, sensitizing all stakeholders (Government of Kerala, 2022b).

### **3.2.2. Tagging each goal with a nodal department**

To effectively work towards achieving each goal, the state has designated a nodal administrative department for each goal, and a senior officer, in the cadre of Deputy

Secretary or above, from the concerned department is designated as the nodal officer. The nodal administrative departments for each goal are given in **Table 2**.

**Table 2.** Tagged nodal administrative departments.

<b>Sustainable Development Goals</b>	<b>Nodal Administrative Department</b>
No Poverty	Local Self Government
Zero Hunger	Agriculture
Good Health and Well-Being	Health & Family Welfare
Quality Education	General Education
Gender Equality	Women & Child Development
Clean Water and Sanitation	Water Resources
Affordable and Clean Energy	Power
Decent Work and Economic Growth	Labour & Skills
Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Industries & Commerce
Reduced Inequalities	Local Self Government
Sustainable Cities and Communities	Local Self Government
Responsible Consumption and Production	Environment
Climate Action	Environment
Life Below Water	Fisheries
Life On Land	Forest & Wild Life
Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Home & Vigilance
Partnership for the Goals	Finance

Source: G.O. (Rt) No.183/2021/P&EA.

The administrative departments were identified in corollary to their exhibited capacity in translating the popular needs relevant to the objective of their affairs to impactful outcomes. These specialized line departments, through their efficient projectising and financing through their channels and linking with center and state schemes, have been culminating multi-stakeholders in tackling local issues. Thus, assigning nodal administrative department status ensured that the existing system for good governance could be economized upon to facilitate the achievement of the particular goals tagged.

### **3.2.3. Developing themes, tagging SDGs with themes and the course of action for localization**

The state of Kerala, through the Action Plan for Knowledge Management, in collaboration with KILA and the Local Self Government Department, has been working on localizing SDGs. Towards this, the strategy of ‘Low cost or No cost’ activities was adopted for environment creation through the rendering of training programs towards administrative capacity building and local community ownership. The action plan calls initially for the training of elected representatives and LSG officials along with other supporting stakeholders in the condensed and mapped SDGs contained in the nine thematic Sankalp vision statements (Resolution by Panchayat for Development), developed by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR), Government of India. This thematic approach aggregates the SDGs into nine broad themes to enable localization at the grassroots through concerted and collaborative efforts of all

concerned stakeholders. Each GP in the state is supposed to undertake at least one Sankalp theme to work on based on their development priorities and prioritize it in the GPDP. Each of the Sankalp vision statements is broken down into a basket of 138 local targets for the GPs to choose from based on their priority areas. The targets are measured by 508 indicators listed in the Local Indicator Framework finalized by the MoPR, comprising 384 mandatory indicators, which are the National and State priority indicators, and 124 optional indicators to be selected by the State. The GPs should choose not less than 50 indicators a year, including the mandatory indicators, and incorporate relevant activities in the GPDP against the total of 607 activities in the action plan identified by the MoPR. By comparing the baseline data collected on all indicators in the year 2021-22, this comprehensive framework helps measure the progress each Panchayat has made towards attaining the SDGs and also towards the identification of priority areas for the upcoming years. The state identified that this elaborate process requires effective training administered to representatives of the state nodal departments and the key stakeholders. As a result, the state developed thematic modules, e-modules and online courses, training materials, and expansion of the pool of master trainers, assessment, and certification of trainers. To ensure community ownership, the state involves SHGs in this training process. So far, 1039 master trainers and 13996 local government representatives have undergone training in SDG localization in the state. Through this, the state envisages attaining saturation in all the themes and the SDGs mapped in them by prioritizing these thematic activities. For the year 2023-24, Kerala is the first state in the nation to have completed Sankalp undertakings in all her 941 GPs (Government of India, n.d.).

Hence, the assimilation of SDG principles into the system was rather smooth as the key implementing agents, the local governments, have been performing such functions in collaboration with the line departments since the inception of decentralized governance in the state. Post-SDG adoption, owing to these well-placed decentralization practices, the governance system exhibited exceptional policy coherence, swift reflexes, and adaptation to the SDGs. This galvanization of state administration towards the objective of localization is made possible due to the age-old 'made to order' approach, which has been central to the state's development strides. This approach reiterates the need for diverging from the 'one size fits all' approach followed in the localization in many countries, where weak political commitment arising from incomplete decentralization often hinders localization efforts (Eunice Annan-Aggrey et al., 2021). Also, the requirement for an all-inclusive approach, in a well-coordinated multilevel public governance system, is essential for successful localization, which is made possible through dedicated organizations in the state (Reddy, 2016; Sarkar et al., 2022). In this section, we prove that the agility exhibited by the state government was because the decentralized system was so rooted in the state's governance structure thereby making the localization of SDGs a process of fine-tuning the existing model.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The discourse put forth by UNDP on the successful implementation of the 2015 development agenda identifies community-based implementation of the goals through

local and regional governments as the transformative channel through which sustainable development can be attained. Even though localization is adopted as the key to the agenda of sustainable development across the world, the resonation of SDGs in local contexts remains a significant challenge. This challenge arises from the prerequisites for strong institutional building and capacity development, constitutional protection for decentralization, adequate funding, accountability of local governance and access to local data. The south Indian state of Kerala, through her historical legacy of successful adoption of decentralized governance, stands as a testimony to satisfying these prerequisites. With the KPR Act of 1994 empowering the local governance structure through the apposite diffusion of an expanded array of funds, functions, and functionaries, constitutional protection of the decentralized system was facilitated. The local governance system in Kerala has strong institutional foundations in terms of resources, authority, and capacity for implementing SDGs at the local level, as against several other countries. Apart from the ground-level GPs, the BPs and DPs of the three-tier classification are also equipped with localization functions similar to the GPs. The practices adopted by the upper tiers also need to be examined as they can lead to informed policy decisions regarding the attainment of SDGs. This strong institutionalization embedded a chain of bodies in the system, enabling transparency and accountability, possibilities for adequate funding, and collection of local data. The People's Plan Campaign asserted the strength of local stakeholders in local development, making the assimilation of SDGs rather smooth. The administrative synergy between line departments and the state, as well as national and international priorities in the implementation of policies, capitalizing on good governance and social capital, along with platforms for participatory planning, administers unique success to the state in localization. Thus, we identify the decentralized governance system of Kerala as the Mechanism in which the Tools and Platforms enabling localization can undertake the Processes through which Innovations necessary for the translation of development goals into action can be carried out. We put forward the argument that the system was capable of assimilating these changes due to the robustness and reflexivity built into the participatory planning process. Further, with the inclusive multi-sectoral chain of actions which accumulates convergence of multi-stakeholders to address the relevant pain areas of the locality using horizontal and vertical linkages and resource mobilization, the state ensures that 'no one is left behind'.

With the adoption of SDGs, Kerala's response was immediate such that the state set up designated organizations responsible for implementing SDGs, sped up the process by assigning departments to deal with specific goals, mapping the activities of the state with the goals, and documenting and researching upon the best practices in the state. Also, institutions such as KSPB, KILA, and DES were already performing functions such as monitoring, dispensing training, and providing data, respectively, for the efficient working of decentralized governance. So, when these institutions were awarded further functions towards SDG localization, the transition enabled their antecedent specializations to concoct output. As a whole, the pre-existing community-based development process, combined with the ethos of good governance, helped Kerala to adopt swift alterations and adjustments suitable to the realization of SDG principles. Thus, the article proves that constant and concerted efforts undertaken by

Kerala through her meticulous and action-oriented decentralized system are the answer to the remarkable feat that the state has achieved through the scores of the SDG India Index.

**Author contributions:** Conceptualization, MSN; methodology, MSN; resources, AA; writing—original draft preparation, AA; writing—review and editing, MSN. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The research was funded by the University of Kerala (Grant No. 7637/2022/UOK, dated 01.10.2022) through the Kerala State Planning Board may affect your future funding.

**Conflict of interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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