



# Understanding the role of physical spaces in social de-segregations: Spatial lessons from Kerala and Northern Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

Within development literature, recent decades have seen an unequivocal turn towards a call for a decentralised and more contextual and vernacular understanding of social, political and economic development. This paper brings together the development literature on the “participatory turn” with Henri Lefebvre’s work on social spaces and *autogestion*, to move beyond the “what” and “how” of participation, to add the question of “where” in exploring efforts to overcome social segregation and build sustainable integrated communities. It discusses two very distinct regional cases—Kerala (India) and Northern Ireland—as examples to argue that our analysis of the potential for transformative politics in society needs to include a study of its “participatory spaces”, and that this requirement transcends simple binaries like North/South, institutional/non-institutional, and top-down/bottom-up.

## 1. Introduction

This paper will study two distinct regional cases, where despite a formal liberal democratic setting, and a legal right of access, the use of public spaces by different social and political communities has been contested to the extent that significant social segregation continues, even if manifested in different ways. It adds to development studies literature by drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre on social spaces and *autogestion*, to argue that attempts at creating a participatory model of development must include conversations on how space—as a physical social space where human relations are shaped—can be made more inclusive and participatory. Only then can one challenge purely elite-led or centrally-driven solutions to complex social problems either from the state or other actors (McDowell et al., 2017; Adler and Feu, 1977). A focus on spatiality can help us understand the dynamics of change, including when progress towards integration is reversed. This in turn improves our understanding of the contexts that can facilitate greater social connectedness.

This article explores the political context of segregated physical spaces in Kerala and Northern Ireland. These may be seen as unlikely cases but utilising examples of such significant difference, but with a shared issue of historic social segregation and different trajectories of change allows an exploration of underlying dynamics which sustain or even introduce segregation of public spaces. Consequently, it shines light on how such explorations are crucial to understanding how space and spatial relations are intrinsic to conversations on power,

development, and state-citizen relationships. Conventional development literature continues to treat “space” as an economic variable that needs to be governed by forms of state-machinery, designed and constructed by technocrats. We argue that bringing together the apparently distinct strands of development literature with the works of Henri Lefebvre can be a first step to problematizing a one-dimensional understanding of space within the former, and consequently, can provide impetus to explore “where” political participation happens.

## 2. Social spaces in development literature: the “where?” question

At least since the 1980s when Robert Chambers called for participatory rural appraisal (PRA)—or an approach where local knowledge and worldviews are incorporated within mainstream developmental projects—“participation” has become part of mainstream developmental literature, but also political and institutional strategies and programmes across the world (Chambers, 1994; Williams, 2004; Rahnama, 2010; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). While it has now been more or less accepted that democratic processes must inevitably have the question of participation at their centre, there continues to be ambiguity within both literature and practice about the nature and scope of these initiatives. McLaverty and Morris (2006) note, for instance, that “there is no generally accepted conception of participatory democracy”, but a general understanding that the concept includes an active participation of citizens in policy making and implementation. Within development

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literature, this understanding of “participation” has expanded into a general critique of “top-down” ideas of growth and policy attributed to the modern state. In his diatribe against “high-modernist ideology” in *Seeing Like A State* (1998), James Scott argues that modern states exercise their control over society using what he calls “projects of legibility and simplification: maps, censuses, national economic plans and related legislative programs” (Scott, 1998; Johns, 2019). Scott asserts that the modern state claims its legitimacy from a combination of both simple and complicated “state-initiated social engineering” interventions designed to control—or attempt to control—aspects of social and political life (Scott, 1998).

By the 2000s, calls for a “participatory turn” within policy and development literature were placed within broader discussions on *how* policy must improve public-access to expert decision-making:

What has to change is the *culture* of governance, within nations as well as internationally; and for this we need to address not only the mechanics, but also the substance of participatory politics. The issue, in other words, is no longer *whether* the public should have a say in technical decisions, but *how* to promote more meaningful interaction among policy-makers, scientific experts, corporate producers, and the public. (Jasanoff, 2003, emphasis in original)

This stress on the “how” question soon became central to critical development studies literature. Niamh Gaynor (2010) reiterates this point in her work on transforming participation, clarifying that she is interested more in the “how” question of development, since there is enough literature on the “what” question (Gaynor, 2010, 205). Transformative action, she argues, requires “engaging diverse, and often emotional, angry, voices, in not just solving, but investigating the causes of developmental problems” (Gaynor, 2010). In short, a mounting critique of centralization of power, claims that governments aren’t reaching far or deep enough to “satisfy the citizens of a globalizing world”, and a consequent call for more participatory modes of planning have been central to developmental literature in recent decades (Jasanoff, 2003). The debate has shifted, in other words, from *what* such a “participatory model” would look like towards *how* participation can accommodate the cultural, political and social nuances in an increasingly global world (Gaynor, 2010). There is little debate that the future of such studies would need a reimagining of state-society relations in general, and increasingly, a specific emphasis on case-specific solutions based on local contexts, rather than universal one-size-fits-all solutions to economic, social and political issues (Brown, 2018; Williams et al., 2015).

While the “what” and “why” questions have rightly received much attention within academic debate and practice, we argue that the “where” question, which requires as much analytical importance, has remained under-examined. Cornwall and Coelho’s (2007) work on the “participatory sphere”—a distinct arena where they situate the interactions between state and society—begins to explore this question to some extent, with their call to move beyond the state/civil society binary, and focus on questions of mobilization, inclusion and consolidation within participatory planning (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). More recently, Cornwall (2017) has discussed the importance of using the concept of *space* to study new arenas of public participation in a way that highlights the relations of power. In the three decades since Chambers’ conception of the PRA and two decades since Jasanoff’s call to “democratize” the discipline, “public space” continues to be a concept understood from a top-down, technocratic standpoint within development literature. The “where” question within participatory planning is relevant for two reasons: first, as some literature in recent years has pointed out, there is a need to move beyond the North-South binary that once dominated developmental literature. Gaynor’s work comparing the case of Malawi and Ireland to explore the influence of globalisation on national government arrangements is a compelling argument in this direction. She uses this comparison of seemingly different regions to highlight a shared “diversity of civic associationalism and embeddedness within wider socio-political relations and culture” (Gaynor, 2010).

Second, at a time when local knowledge and grassroots movements are being embedded into questions of development, there is a need to treat territorial markers, shared spaces and urban geographies with the analytical rigour they deserve.

The contemporary changes to urban life, as Glaeser et al. (2021) note in their introduction to the recent issue on “Shared Spaces in Smart Cities”, highlight the need to re-imagine shared spaces in order to improve shared experiences (Glaeser et al., 2021). Land use policy, they argue, has “often been used to increase, rather than decrease segregation”. Increasingly, it has also resulted in new “types” of segregations, amplifying the need to mediate anti-social aspects of new technology.<sup>1</sup> As we shall argue, addressing the “where” question of participatory planning necessitates that we begin by (a) moving beyond the North-South binary; and (b) exploring alternative socio-spatial imaginations. Both of these have questions of space—both Cartesian but also more abstract—at their centre. Here, the works of French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre on the production of (social) space, and his work on *autogestion* or radical grassroots democracy can provide an important lens from which to begin such an investigation. A turn towards Lefebvre’s work, we believe, can be a constructive way to introduce public spaces into discussions on participatory development. We argue that sustainable models of development and land-use policies must incorporate inclusive social spaces, without which the potential of participatory planning will remain limited. Furthermore, we must free such an analysis from being limited to studying state/civil society structures, to study organisations—institutional, semi-institutional and non-institutional—as vibrant spaces where social relations are produced and sustained. Such an addition of the “use value” of space, Lefebvre argued, has been long-forgotten by scholars.

We assert that the uncertainty within development literature in accounting for better vernacular understandings arises from treating “space” purely as something that “needs” to be governed and designed; and from the inability to think beyond the prescribed state-centric definitions of planning and participation. Together, these two frames limit the analysis of space to something that is carefully planned, designed and administered by the power vested in the modern democratic state. To Lefebvre, this was how space is “conceived” (something he called “representations of space”) by those in power, and must be distinguished from the “lived” or “representational” space. In lived reality, everyday spaces often outlive the conceived purpose with which they are designed and new purposes and forms of participation emerge.

Addressing the “where” question within development literature must include a study of these organic changes within both institutional and informal spaces and what they mean for participatory processes.<sup>2</sup> This is why there is increasing recognition, especially from the Global South, that formal mechanisms of governance are “necessarily incomplete and partial within planned development, particularly when... the state is

<sup>1</sup> The authors list four different forms of segregation that are “associated with the rise of the knowledge economy: segregation within the virtual world, segregation between the physical and the virtual worlds, segregation within the physical world that occurs directly because of information technology, and segregation in the physical world that reflects the larger impact of the knowledge economy on income inequality and the returns to skill” (Glaeser et al., 2021, 06)

<sup>2</sup> We use the term “informal spaces” to mean spaces that, in the Lefebvrian sense, can be studied for their use value rather than exchange. They are everyday spaces where social relations predominate economic or political relations, similar to what Cornwall and Coelho (2007) call the “participatory sphere” which has a semi-autonomous existence, outside and apart from the institutions of formal politics”. To Božeková (2016) such informal spaces are represented by “a sense of belonging, an emphasis on the quality of interpersonal relationships”, making them different from more formal, institutional structures. For more on “informality” from a spatial perspective, see also Mahmoud and Elrahman 2016; Babere, (2015); A Roy, (2010); Calzati et al. (2022).

intervening within a dynamic community in which paralegal sources of livelihood and forms of tenure are widespread" (Williams et al., 2015; emphasis in original). There are spaces of development that exist beyond the designed, institutional, formal structures and they need to be part of any attempt at understanding developmental processes. Furthermore, Lefebvre argues that the difference between conceived space (representations of space) and the lived (social) reality of it (representational space) is where one can study the potential to challenge these very power structures. Seen thus, informality in all its forms—procedural, spatial and social—becomes a crucial component of social lives, and lived experiences is seen increasingly as an important component of development and governance.<sup>3</sup> In other words, formal, institutional spaces like state structures, and non-state structures, civil society and other spaces including informal social groups must all be part of the developmental narrative, and this complicated relationship between informality and planning is part of the challenge faced by experts and state policy.

The incorporation of an explicit concern with space, both conceptual and the lived reality, in development literature would respond to the growing awareness about spatial praxis within social science (Soja, 1989), and the call to bridge the gap between theory and praxis within academia and practice more broadly (Guru and Sarukkai, 2012). This is also reflected in conflict studies where, over the last decade, there has been a new focus on the question of the relationship between peace and space (McDowell et al., 2017), the "potential for geographers to contribute to peace" (Kobayashi, 2009), and to "develop tools to identify and explore transformative possibilities for peace" (Megoran, 2010). Williams and McConnell, (2011) argue that these attempts must work towards engaging with peace both as process and content in a way that facilitates academic action that is proactive rather than reactive. While much has been written about the spatiality of conflict, there is now a greater focus on the spatiality of peace and, further, to understand peacebuilding at the institutional level, and also as the micro-labour invested in maintaining everyday peaceful life (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006; P. Williams, 2007). Having a clearer understanding of "where" social engagement which helps grassroots peacebuilding or reduce social segregation takes place is therefore a potentially important and neglected aspect of analysis of conflict in socially and physically divided societies with tangible or intangible forms of segregations.

### 2.1. *Autogestion, social spaces and radical democracy*

Writing at the time of the rise of "social democracy" model in Europe, Henri Lefebvre saw the tendency of modern nation states—both capitalist and socialist—to expand control over their citizens, but also their spaces. Progressive politics, he argued, must look for alternative visions of social life outside of conventional political-economic institutions (Lefebvre, 2009). The quest for such a "politics of the possible" led to his systematic critique of contemporary state structures, proposing "*autogestion*" as a theoretical and practical alternative. *Autogestion* literally means "self-management" (Vieta, 2016), but Lefebvre's use of the term has been translated as "radical democracy", "grassroots democracy", or "grassroots control". *Autogestion* is, to Lefebvre, the modern equivalent of the "withering away" of the state: "...socialists must seek out a state form that 'wither away', not in the sense of disappearing, but of being transformed into a mechanism of grassroots, radically democratic collective decision making" (Brenner and Stuart, 2009). Such a model of grassroots democracy, according to Lefebvre, can only be achieved by "the strengthening of the social—civil society, groups, cities and local administrations—rather than crushing the social between the economic and the political" (Lefebvre, 2009). In fact, he observed—much before similar debates ensued within mainstream development literature—the

need to distinguish between the concepts of growth and development calling for a "critique of the capitalistic growth dynamic... in the name of alternative frameworks for the production of everyday life" (Brenner and Stuart, 2009, 35). We submit that Lefebvre's work offers a useful lens to spatialize concepts relating to participatory development and citizen engagement, and to begin to address the "where" question within development studies.

One can already see how Lefebvre's interest in the potential of *autogestion* as an alternative social and political system resembles the "participatory turn" discussed earlier. On the one hand, in trying to tap the "potential" for change, Lefebvre allows us to move beyond the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy. Now, state intervention can be studied as a necessary but not sufficient condition for participatory democracy to be radical: "...the space for initiative granted from above and by a sort of charter to the subordinate units may correspond more to ideology than to practice, more to illusions than to possibilities... this space for initiative is at once the site and the stake of struggles" (Lefebvre, 2009). Both formal institutional structures and more organic grassroots spaces become important units of analysis. Such a problematisation of space (separating their conceived and lived purposes) opens up the possibility to study *even* the more informal social interactions that occur within institutional spaces. This allows one to move, as others like Gaynor (2010) have argued, beyond this binary of top-down/bottom-up, but also address concerns from some scholars that participatory development in the neoliberal world is a "de-politicising" phenomenon (Ferguson, 1994). Instead, it allows us to treat decentralisation and participatory development, as an "open-ended and ongoing process of engagement" (Williams, 2004; Williams et al., 2015). Recent work by Glaeser et al. (2021) has also focused on how rising income inequalities can also lead to an erosion of shared spaces, as the rich show "less willingness" in the upkeep and protection of shared public spaces.

Secondly, germane to our endeavour, Lefebvre argues that such an essentially participatory grassroots democracy must challenge the state-spatial strategies or the ways in which the state dominates and hegemonises (social) space that dictate how everyday experiences are shaped. He argues that this relation extends beyond the Cartesian meaning—that of national territory, including roads, canals, railroads, etc.—and includes institutions of social architecture which constitute what he calls the "social space"—institutions and systems that engender social relations in (and of) space. This relation with—and control of—space is mediated through legitimised power that states enjoy, and hence, do not easily give up (Lefebvre, 2009). After all, the attempt to control spaces—the conceived, perceived, and lived—becomes an important part of a dominant ideology, power structure, or government: "according to the perspective of politics, no part of space can or may be allowed to escape domination ... power aspires to control space in its entirety" (Lefebvre, 1991, 387–88). In other words, Lefebvre asserts that space and the state are intricately connected: "during the course of its development, the State binds itself to space through a complex and changing relation that has passed through certain critical points. Born in and with space, the state may also perish with it." (Lefebvre, 2009, 224).

The insight that governance needs to move beyond a top-down approach to incorporate participatory citizenship is interdisciplinary, and transcends North-South binary. There remains a gap in literature across disciplines about the "where" question pertaining to this project of participatory citizenship. Drawing from Lefebvre's view, we argue that the purpose of grassroots democracy, then, is a "re-democratisation" of institutions, but also of society at large. Lefebvre's framework also allows us to transcend the (mythical) North-South binary which, as Gaynor (2010) argues, is rendered less useful by an increasingly globalised world. In fact, *autogestion* as a project has in recent years taken root in many countries across the world—from Europe to Latin America to the Indian subcontinent (Vieta, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> For more examples, see: Roy, (2005); Hackenbroch, Baumgart, and Kreibich, (2009); Petersen et al. (2018)

### 3. Case-selection and methodology

If it is accepted that this understanding of space is an important part of our study of social relations, it requires some practical method of analysis. A fruitful beginning can be made by an analysis of empirical evidence drawn from the experience of different regions when it comes to questions of grassroots democracy and participatory development; how power has been reified, challenged or subverted in these cases; and what (new) spaces of *autogestion* have opened up.

This article seeks to do this through a comparison of two unlikely cases—Kerala (India) and Northern Ireland. Kerala and Northern Ireland are very different cases in many respects, but both have a history of segregated physical spaces that has left a deep impact on the lived realities of different sections of the populations, and thereby, on political and social life. Important to this discussion, both cases saw a re-imagination of the role of states and civil society in the 1990s, with different approaches to overcoming the social segregation of space. For this reason, they offer a good comparative context in which to explore the social segregation of contemporary physical spaces and the degree to which Lefebvre's approach can overcome the specifics of any one case. The approach is not seeking to establish a causal mechanism. We do not argue either that breaking down social segregation will lead directly to more participatory democracy, or that more participatory forms of democracy will see social segregation end. There is however a complex inter-relationship, that is enabling in both directions. It is difficult to see how we can understand social segregation without a better analysis of how politics strengthens or weakens it. It is equally difficult to see how local forms of participation can be meaningfully analysed without understanding the space – physical and social – in which they occur or do not occur.

The methodological approach is to explore how space is understood and used in these two different contexts, at a time of political change, in political texts, secondary literature, expert commentary, press coverage and other grey literature. This review is seeking to establish if, despite contextual variation, similar themes emerge which are useful for our understanding of the relationship between space and participation in development and peace studies.

Until the late nineteenth century, Kerala, on the south-western coast of India, was a region with extremely segregated social life based on caste, like much of the Indian subcontinent. A marked feature was the extreme spatial segregations and very limited possibilities to traverse them. Apart from untouchability which was widely practiced across the subcontinent, oppressed castes in Kerala were subject to degradational practices like “unapproachability” and “unseeability”, making shared social spaces an impossibility in traditional order. While the former prescribed specific distances that had to be maintained between members of different castes to avoid the upper castes being “polluted” from being in close proximity with the lowered castes, the latter was a more extreme practice where even the mere sight of a member from the oppressed castes was deemed polluting for the upper castes.

Over the twentieth century, Kerala challenged the centuries-old system of social relations and pledged to create a shared future and a path of development that cut across religious and sectarian divisions. The postcolonial state continued its commitment to nurturing secularism and equality, paving the way for the modern “progressive” public sphere that has marked Kerala's political and social ethos for a century. At the centre of this transformation was the creation of a new spatiality with new spatial practices that made “participation” central to governance and public life (Harikrishnan, 2023). Yet this does not mean a complete rejection of the “top-down” approaches or state intervention in addressing questions of justice and equality. In fact, one of the peculiarities of the developmental experience in Kerala has been a conscious intervention by the state's progressive political forces. An important example is the devolution of power by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPIM] led government through the “People's Plan” (PP) in 1996, despite there being “no great demand for decentralisation from

the people” at the time (Mannathukkaren, 2021). The initiative was rather the progressive parties' response to changing social, political and economic situations both within India and abroad: the end of the Cold War, increasing threats from neoliberalism and the opening up of India's economy in 1991, and the rising threat of right-wing Hindutva politics. As we shall see, the devolution of power and re-imagination of the role of civil society reflect some of the theoretical debates discussed in the last section, and makes Kerala a compelling case to study the potential of *autogestion*.

The language used in writing about Kerala's modernity—segregation, shared spaces, community-relations, secularism—is often heard in discussions on Northern Ireland, where, the Good Friday Agreement followed more than 25 years of armed conflict. It has been successful in almost ending armed conflict, but peace is still often uttered in the same breath as “fragile”.

The Agreement only mentions the word “community-based” once, in the section on Reconciliation and Victims which recognised the need to support “special community-based initiatives based on international best practice” (“The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement: The Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations” 1998). It does not provide any specific details of the shape or structure of such initiatives, or say *where* such initiatives would emerge. The agreement that formed the basis of the GFA is institutionally focused. It creates a “power-sharing” executive and assembly (regional parliament), where all parties securing a number of seats in the local parliament above a certain threshold are guaranteed seats in the executive. In addition, key votes in that Assembly can only be passed with majority support in the Assembly-blocs from the two major political communities. Despite this elaborate mechanism for institutionalised sharing of power, the Agreement largely simply assumes that peace and the sharing of societal resources including public space would “trickle-down” to the community-level once it was established at the institutional and elite levels (Hancock, 2008; Harikrishnan, 2022). In practice, while even elite level cooperation has been partial with long periods where the power-sharing government has collapsed, the degree of change at community level has been even more limited. A series of policy reports over the last decade and a half show the government adopting / attempting to adopt an alternative approach towards building a “shared future” in Northern Ireland. This focuses on institutions, and also an active community-level civil society intervention to build spaces of trust, friendships and continued interactions.

The two case studies are liberal democracies where there is no legal basis for segregation and where in fact there are legal frameworks to prevent such segregation. They are also societies which have been deeply divided politically and socially, and where that social context led to profound physical separation of communities, which was widely understood to be a barrier to community reconciliation and peace-building. We study an epochal period in both regions' modern histories—the 1990s—to focus on how the different developmental trajectories in each case can be better understood by looking at changes within their respective spatialities. Crucially, we study how inclusive social spaces at the grassroots are central to the “where” question of participatory development. Both the GFA in Northern Ireland and the People's Plan in Kerala were responses to local and international changes within politics, and both aimed at envisioning an alternative approach to development and participatory politics. To that extent, these initiatives included a re-imagination not merely of politics at a superficial level, but also of the horizontal linkages at the community level, including their spatiality. An inclusive approach towards development as envisioned by the GFA and People's Plan cannot, after all, be successful unless segregation at the community level and thereby, the question of social polarisation are addressed. Lefebvre's work on *autogestion*, as we shall argue, offers a useful framework within which these changes—and their potential to subvert institutional and social power structures—can be studied.

We make the case that the presence of a politically active civil society, based on horizontal linkages, requires the desegregation of space



at the community level. We address how the repurposing of physical spaces in formal and informal settings can achieve this; how shared experiences relate to “where” questions (Wall, 2016; Guru, 2012). This contributes to our understanding of how the establishment of participatory citizenship can be facilitated. Methodologically, the paper identifies common conceptual linkages, drawing on local political discourse in the two case studies. It does not seek to “prove” a theory, or establish causal links at this time. Instead, drawing on these experiences from the two regions, we argue that this approach provides a conceptual way to explore interlinkages between on the one hand, successes and failures of de-segregation and, on the other, the “where” of participation in terms of physical and social spaces. Such an analysis is important for a range of disciplines, not least land administration.

### 3.1. Kerala: “People’s Plan” as a participatory model

Kerala has been a region of much interest to social scientists over the last century. From being an extremely caste-cleaved society for centuries with few shared spaces for everyday interactions with each other, Kerala saw a tremendous transformation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that created a relatively inclusive and secular society. The communist ideology that found wide acceptance in the region after the 1930s went on to shape policies of the postcolonial state irrespective of the centre or left coalitions that have been in government since 1957.<sup>4</sup> Törnquist (2019, 15) calls this the first phase of broad-based collective mobilisation of people in modern Kerala which prioritised class identity over caste or religion, and paved the way for a path of welfarist development. Consequently, the second half of the last century saw a celebration of what came to be called the “Kerala Model” of development—strong social development through increased public investments despite low economic growth rates. The Communist parties that played an important role in shaping social and electoral politics in the state also took keen interest in redistributive justice through land and labour reforms in the second half of the twentieth century (Manathukkaren, 2021, 251–83).

While the role of a proactive state has been credited with much of these achievements, the vibrant participatory politics and social mobilization in Kerala has historically been built upon a spatiality that emerged during the early-modern period and was catalysed by the reform movements in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Emerging initially as a movement against centuries-old practices of the caste system in the nineteenth century, Kerala society saw radical transformations in social, political and economic spheres within a short span in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A characteristic feature of this change was the creation of a number of semi and non-institutional spaces that encouraged public discussions of politics and culture (Harikrishnan, 2023). Importantly, these spaces like libraries, reading rooms, teashops, all aimed at desegregating society, and nurtured a public sphere where policy and developmental initiatives received ample public scrutiny, debate and deliberation. These informal social spaces, in other words, were crucial in shaping participatory politics in Kerala. Furthermore, as Lefebvre reminds us, even institutional spaces often outlive their conceived role, and serve a social purpose in everyday life. Public schools in Kerala, for instance, serve an important purpose beyond their role as educational spaces, in cutting across the caste-divide. In Kerala, the emergence of missionary schools in the nineteenth century which provided education to members from caste-oppressed communities, and the eventual opening up of government schools to all members of public facilitated a conscious effort

towards literacy. The sharing of a physical space with members from communities that were deemed “unsociable” was important in shaping secularism for many political leaders in the region. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the stalwart communist leader who went on to become a Chief Minister of Kerala wrote about the social influence of public schools in shaping his politics and worldview, at a time when caste-specific segregated spaces were the norm:

This was an important turning point in my life ... joining school felt like beginning a new life—an environment entirely different from the one I had been accustomed to; friends and teachers from different castes and religions. And one didn’t study by oneself or with two or three other classmates, but in classrooms with twenty five to thirty students. (Namboodiripad, 2017, 74).

Here, a school’s role as a secularising agent can only be studied if we separate the conceived and lived role of schools as social spaces. Mixed schooling has continued to remain one of the strengths nurturing a secular and vibrant public sphere in Kerala, and continues to bring together children from across divisions of identity. Over 75 percent of students in Kerala continue to go to either public educational institutions, or government-aided schools arguably most of which are socially mixed (Aravindan, 2006).<sup>5</sup> As we shall see, the absence of such mixed spaces in Northern Ireland may explain the different socio-spatial relations that have emerged there in the last decades.

The attention towards informal social spaces—central as we have seen to the experience of development—led to the explosion of film societies, sports clubs, reading clubs and similar spaces across Kerala in the 1960s and 70s. By the 1980s, however, this developmental path of the coveted “Kerala Model” hit a natural dead-end, owing to unsustainable economic stagflation, mounting fiscal burden, and the rising consumerism prompted by foreign remittances (Törnquist and Tharakan, 1996). There was also the ideological challenge to the socialist model in Kerala from the end of the Cold War and the dominance of neoliberal capitalism. Importantly, this period also saw the rise of Hindu nationalism as a formidable electoral and cultural force across the country, and the visible signs that questions of caste, religion and gender remained unresolved in Kerala (Devika, 2007; Tharakan, 1995; Panikkar, 2014; Osella and Osella, 2007). It had become evident that the early promises of the communist movement and the postcolonial state that resolving the class-question could automatically lead to social cohesion, had failed. The emergence of the postcolonial state as a hegemonic power in the 1970s also led to a general disenchantment with electoral politics, and many young poets, film makers, thinkers and writers moving away from the mainstream left in Kerala, towards a more radical (new) left, which gave them the space to fight for larger social issues that the organised political left had failed to raise (Satchidanandan, 2008). Germane to our discussion, then, the above-mentioned spatiality that had cajoled development in Kerala for a century also came under stress from these changes on the one hand, and the emergence of digital media that affected physical social spaces on the other. The many broad-based popular organisations that emerged from the reform movements were undermined by the end of the twentieth century (Törnquist and Tharakan, 1996).

Progressive and secular forces in Kerala, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (hereafter, CPIM), responded to the larger economic, political and social challenges by inaugurating a decentralization programme called the “People’s Plan Campaign” tested in the late-1980s and implemented widely between 1996 and 2001, devolving new authority and resources to local level administrations. Törnquist (2019) called this the second phase of broad-based collective mobilisation of

<sup>4</sup> The state has been an unachievable dream to the right-wing Hindu nationalist party which has won immense electoral success outside Kerala in recent decades, and has been in power at the centre since 2014. Kerala has only elected one Member to the State legislature from the BJP, and elected the first representative from the party in general elections in 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Schools in Kerala belong to three categories, based on their ownership and management: Government (public schools), Aided (Government pays the salary of the staff members of the private school), and Unaided (Management of the school meets the salary requirement of the teachers)

people in Kerala, when a radically new approach towards social and political challenges shaped the trajectory of development. Central to the initiative was an understanding that in the contemporary world, there is a need to channelise various forces “from below” alongside more formal institutional policy frameworks from above; in other words, a tangible effort towards what developmental literature called participatory planning. CPIM leader and economist Thomas Isaac, one of the chief architects of the Plan, laid out the goal to bring together various groups of people in every locality: elected representatives; officials within concerned departments; non-officials with subject-matter expertise and experience; general public; and mass organisations (Isaac and Harilal, 1997). The facilitation of local level development by “mobilising both people and resources” and the creation and maintenance of public and collective goods such as in land and water management were central to the decentralisation campaign (Kannan, 2000). Combined with this was the reconceptualization of the role of civil society in state-citizen relationships, as Thomas Isaac wrote:

The People’s Campaign, instead of taking civic culture as historically determined and given, actively seeks to nurture a civic culture that would promote the grassroots democratic institutions. A radical transformation of the development culture of the state is a necessary pre-requisite for successful participatory decentralisation. It also requires basic attitude changes towards the development process among all the key players involved: the elected representatives, officials, experts, and the people at large (Isaac, 2001, 13).

Here, we see a clear focus on participatory development, and an indication that its success would hinge on combined efforts from state machinery, grassroots movements and civil society organisations, which in Kerala included numerous informal collectives or voluntary groups. Experts claimed that the campaign represented “the most ambitious effort to build local institutions of participatory democratic governance ever undertaken in the subcontinent”, and a step to move from “constitution of public spheres... to the institutionalization of participatory publics” (Heller et al., 2007). It involved, in other words, a state-led attempt to redefine the relationship between state, citizens and civil society, and the emergence of new participatory initiatives from grassroots organisations, expert groups and civil society organisations, apart from the state (Mannathukkaren, 2021, Kannan, 2000).

Crucially, these changes opened up “new democratic spaces”, conduits for “negotiation, information and exchange” (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007), and new spaces for political action that re-imagined ideas of citizens’ participation (Williams, 2004). Organisations like the *Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad* (KSSP)—the People’s Science Movement, a non-party affiliated secular organisation with presence in villages across the state—were at the forefront. Another space that opened up as part of these changes was *Kudumbasree*, women’s neighbourhood groups that have come to be a crucial part of public sphere in Kerala today (Isaac, 2001, Devika and Thampi, 2007; Williams et al., 2011).

The conceived purpose of the Plan, as it can be seen, suggests that the Kerala government in the late 1990s was envisioning a “bottom-up” participatory model that radically transformed state-society relations, keeping civil society organisations, social groups, and individuals at the centre. It was also different from mere lip-service to devolution, as has been done in many regions. As Heller et al. (2007) note:

...the campaign stands apart from most decentralization reforms in the degree to which the boundaries between the state and civil society were blurred, both in terms of design and implementation. In this sense, the campaign is very much an example of the type of synergistic state-society relations that... are key to sustained institutional reforms.

Further, they add that this is pivotal in “creating the spaces in which associational autonomy can flourish and can shape public choices” (Heller et al., 2007). The many formal and informal collectives, Youth Clubs and film societies, Self Help Groups, Residents Welfare

Associations, all became stakeholders in this process. Importantly, through their active engagement with the local communities, they became potential spaces for what Lefebvre called *autogestion*.

In short, the Plan was a proactive step from the government to nourish shared spaces at the grassroots level where people could be active participants in political and developmental initiatives; to open up, other words, spaces of *autogestion*. The initiatives would be linked to public authority through local government bodies. Such a conception is already a step away from the “prostrate civil society” that Scott (1998) argued “lacks the capacity to resist these [high modernist] plans”, and closer to the more optimistic “new civil society groups” that Jasanoff (2010) speaks about. They open up new democratic spaces that move beyond the institutional rigidity of existing structures, and potential for a new “participatory sphere” (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). The crucial point to note is that the Plan in Kerala was still tied to the legal and constitutional guarantees of the state, but its strong links with the grassroots movements and ability to cut across religious, social and class differences at the community level were crucial in its claims to legitimacy.

While the possibilities opened up by social spaces like schools, Sport and Youth Clubs and grassroots civil society organisations in shaping political culture and public consciousness are pivotal to the success of Kerala’s relatively secular and inclusive social relations as compared to other parts of India, it must be noted that such negotiations of/in space are far from a settled project. A spatial history of Kerala suggests that the evolution of participatory spaces is anything but a linear project. The decentralisation campaign of the 1990s was specifically aimed as a response to the emergence of the neoliberal state as a hegemonic power, but studies have also indicated to how the last decades have also seen the re-emergence of other forms of religious and social conservatism. The political culture in India has, since the 1980s, seen the re-emergence of narrow right-wing populism in the form of Hindu nationalism—a political and cultural movement that threatened the secular public sphere.

Despite their failure to make inroads into electoral politics in Kerala, the Hindu nationalists continue to pose a threat spatially, and many recent examples highlight this threat of increased segregation of spaces. For instance, the walling of public grounds around temples has been a common phenomenon in Kerala since the 1990s. Recently, in Vadayampady near the city of Kochi, such a “walling” of a public area that had been used for decades by members belonging to all castes led to protests. In 2018, protestors—a large number of which were women—took to the streets to protest a controversial judgement by the Supreme Court of India that overturned a centuries-old practice that denied women of menstruating age (arbitrarily fixed at 10–50 years) entry into a temple because of the belief that the deity is celibate. Claiming that the judgement “intervened into religious rights” of Hindus, large protests were carried out in public spaces against the judgement. Such assertion of religiosity on public spaces has been gaining momentum in recent decades in Kerala, and have taken violent turns in various parts of the country in recent years (Ramachandran, 2020). (Fig. 1)

The experience of Kerala suggests that government, public policy and public institutions do matter. In both the post-independence period and in recent decades, government decisions created a framework for social engagement, and the physical spaces created by those policies both allowed community engagement and also became a site of contestation for the Hindu-right, who sought to re-create social segregation. Schools, streets, sports and youth clubs all have immense potential in shaping positive social relations and thereby, inclusive development. But we argue that to understand the full potential of these social spaces to do this, we must also study their positive spill-over effects, and the lived reality of how these organisations function as vibrant associational spaces. In other words, we argue that a study of these spaces should include a separation of their conceived purpose, and their lived reality. Only then can we fully grasp the power of *autogestion* within these spaces.

### 3.2. Northern Ireland: devolution and peacebuilding

Northern Ireland remains a highly segregated society, a legacy dating from before the partition of Ireland in 1921, and reinforced in the recent conflict period. Historically, the most dominant political divisions (other than class and gender) reinforced each other, pervading even the social lives of citizens across this divide. Those who supported the region remaining part of the UK were primarily from a Protestant background, even if not personally religious. They typically were descendants of those who arrived in Ireland as part of the settler-colonial community and supporters of colonial rule. Supporters of Irish independence (historically) and Irish unity in the modern era were, in contrast, primarily descendants of the “native” Irish, who were opposed to or displaced by the colonial project, and were more typically Catholic in social background. Class was a factor within each community, but did not form an alternative mode of political organisation, in part because of the very different experiences of the nationalist and unionist working classes. Social segregation was further increased during the armed conflict of 1969–1997, which in the early period saw a large scale movement of people, especially in urban areas (Doherty and Poole, 1997). Systematic discrimination, continuing in the workplace until the 1990s, saw rates of unemployment in the nationalist community over two times higher than in the unionist community. As we shall see, this division remains highly institutionalised in first and second level schooling and in public housing. Social (and spatial) segregation is also widespread in sporting and cultural organisations, and in a sense of public spaces which are perceived as “safe” or “unsafe” for a member of a political community to even pass through, let alone socialise in.

Such segregation within schooling and housing mean that young people, especially, largely live with very limited interactions with other communities. In Northern Ireland however there is an additional context, as a consequence of conflict and post-conflict dynamics. The region is in the midst of a slowly evolving peace process after twenty five years of armed conflict. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement offered a form of power-sharing government and a process of social change to overcome decades of discrimination against the minority nationalist community.<sup>6</sup> While the ceasefire has been successful, the political tensions around social change remain high. Political and demographic change has seen the previously hegemonic unionist community slowly lose a monopoly of power. In 2017, their representatives also lost their majority in the regional Assembly. The population remains divided with supporters of unionist parties making up about 42 % of the population, those who support parties seeking a united Ireland about 42 %, and centre ground parties, supportive of power-sharing but without a fixed position on a United Ireland versus staying in the UK, making up the balance of power.

Although there has been a reduction in visible violence in Northern Ireland after the signing of the GFA, researchers have time and again pointed out to the “fragile” nature of peace in NI (Connolly and Doyle 2019; Richmond et al., 2023). In the early years after the Agreement, researchers pointed out that devolution had failed to create a “new space for thinking about government and public services”, at least partly because of a “lack of commitment to the level of cross-community cooperation necessary” (Jeffery, 2004). Some, like Oberschall and Palmer (2005) argue that the sectarianism that continues to dominate

<sup>6</sup> In Northern Ireland those who support Northern Ireland leaving the UK and created a ‘United Ireland’ along with the Republic of Ireland are generally simply called “nationalists” in the literature and in common usage. Those who support NI remaining part of the UK are typically called “unionists” (that is the support the union with Great Britain). Nationalists typically hold Irish passports, and a majority come from a Catholic background - though religion is not part of their political discourse and they may not be personally religious. Unionists in contrast typically hold British passports and a majority come from a Protestant background.



Fig. 1. A Hindu religious procession in Thrissur. Photograph: S. Harikrishnan, 2017

politics and community relations in post-Agreement Northern Ireland can be traced to a “contradiction” within the Agreement. The power sharing structures it established have institutionalized the politics of sectarianism which has undermined efforts at peace-building and grassroots conciliation (Oberschall and Palmer 2005). Others argue that the power-sharing model between the two dominant communities, based on election results, was the only way to move beyond previous majoritarian and discriminatory government (Doyle, 2021). There is however a tension between community representation, over 80 % of which is based on political parties who secure their votes from either Irish nationalist or British unionist communities, at the institutional level to ensure the immediate need for non-discrimination and inclusion, and a desire to create inclusive social and cultural space, in the interests of long-term political progress.

Two common issues are pointed out by academics working on participatory development in Northern Ireland. First, they point out that the Agreement made any intervention towards desegregation top-heavy. Second the Agreement, in its attempt at bringing an end to visible violence, left much ambiguity in the meaning and definitions of the very anchors on which such peace would be sustained (Oberschall and Palmer 2005). Together, these two factors meant that there was at times a lack of autonomy at the grassroots, making it difficult for any meaningful engagement or the emergence of a non-partisan civil society. In other words, for desegregation—both social and spatial—to occur, there must be a more meaningful engagement at the community level that includes state structures, but also civil society organisations and other informal structures. This is the true potential of *autogestion*. Kerala’s example shows us that the potential of such grassroots development allows us to move towards a fruitful way for institutional and non-institutional stakeholders to engage more effectively.

In terms of institutional spaces, there has been very little change in the school system in NI which continues to be largely divided, between the two dominant communities, based on religious and political background (Early et al., 2024), as each community has in reality supported the status quo, despite rhetorical commitment to sharing. This is in contrast to the case of Kerala where, as we have seen, desegregation of institutions like schools have been crucial in shaping a secular public. In Northern Ireland, the segregation of schools at least partially reflects a similar segregation in public housing. Recent reports record that close to 90 percent of social housing for low income families and schooling continue to remain segregated in post-Agreement Northern Ireland, due to low level violence or the fear of it (Moffett et al., 2020; McClements, 2018). Where change and political contestation has been visible to date has been in two mirroring areas. Public spaces have remained in popular discourse when, during the summer months, traditional unionists have



asserted their (now prior) dominant and majority status by staging thousands of marches in public areas – “celebrating” their historic history over Catholicism and by implication Irish nationalism. Many are unproblematic, happening in areas where they are welcome and supported. A small number of often large marches, go through nationalist areas where they are not welcome and are often an occasion for sectarian anti-Irish and anti-Catholic abuse of locals and sporadic street violence (Reilly, 2021; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). Unionists insist on their right to walk the “Queens Highway”, in any part of Northern Ireland. Nationalists insist that such a right has to be qualified, by a right not to be on the receiving end of abuse. Questions of who controls land and space continue to be a source of political contestation. Secondly, as the nationalist community has grown in size and confidence, aspects of Irish cultural identity, previously restricted to the private sphere or to almost 100 % nationalist areas, have become more visible, in the media, and in the use of public spaces in more mixed settings. This has also seen more interest in that culture – the Irish language, music and sports in particular - from those who grew up in a traditional unionist setting. This has seen a backlash from more hardline traditional unionists who object to such symbols of Irish culture being performed, used or visible in “public” settings in what they regard as “unionist” areas.

There is variation in practice and some progress, despite the challenges. For example, a group of mostly women led by prominent unionist working class activist Linda Ervine, has started publicly exploring Irish language and culture, while explicitly re-affirming their support for Northern Ireland remaining in the UK. They organise language classes in unionist districts and explore Irish music and sports – culturally sharing and engaging with others in what was traditionally perceived as a solidly unionist area. While receiving some online abuse, their activities were otherwise welcomed or ignored. However, when they sought to establish a pre-school in their area, which would teach through the medium of the Irish language, the level of protest, abuse and threat was such that the pre-school had to be moved out of their own locality (Meredith, 2021). The semi-institutional setting that was attached to the idea of an Irish language pre-school in a unionist area, it would seem, was perceived by at least a sizeable section of the community, as a threat. In this case, mixed response from the local community, and the absence of active support from more moderate unionists forced the pre-school out of its planned “space” in its own unionist locality.

One of the biggest successes for cultural integration in recent years, was in the same area and involved some of the same local activists - the establishment of a branch of the Gaelic Athletic Association in the almost exclusively unionist area of East Belfast. The GAA is the largest mass sporting organisation in Ireland, devoted to promoting traditional Irish sports, and reflecting an Irish cultural identity on an all-island basis. Traditionally in Northern Ireland its sports would have been played and supported almost exclusively by the Irish nationalist community. In 2020 a group of local people sought to establish a club in East Belfast. On the positive side it has established a very large branch, introducing traditional Irish sports to communities who would not have engaged before, and supporting people from different political communities to play sports together and share a common social space (Beutler, 2008; Cárdenas, 2013; Lea-Howarth, 2006). However, on the negative side, despite, or perhaps even because of its success, it has not been able to find a physical sports ground in its own community due to opposition from hard-line unionist politicians and activists, and has been forced to train and play games in neighbouring districts (Young, 2022; Breslin, 2022). The growth of the club, requiring it to develop a physical space in which to train and play within what was seen by some as a “unionist” area, escalated opposition from hardline unionists including politicians from unionist parties. When the Belfast City Council agreed to grant a facility to East Belfast GAA in 2023 for instance, some unionist politicians opposed the move, with one party accusing the GAA of aligning itself with the “celebration of terrorism” (Campbell, 2023).

In another positive example, marches, reflecting and promoting

unionist culture can now take place, without contestation and without sectarian abuse, in the predominantly nationalist second city in Northern Ireland, Derry, following a negotiated local agreement (McKinney, 2021) (Fig. 2). However, in other parts of Northern Ireland where the population balance between unionists and Irish nationalists is more even, unionists have refused in principle to negotiate around where they can march – insisting on their right to march wherever they wish – regardless of a history of marchers shouting abuse at Irish nationalist local residents.

Northern Ireland has seen a dramatic fall-off in armed conflict following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In that regard it is a successful peace process, where the threat of a return to full armed conflict now seems remote. A model for power-sharing government, between political parties, exists at the regional level, even if it periodically collapses. A programme of de-militarisation and civil rights has produced a much higher degree of equality between the previously dominant unionist community and the insurgent Irish-identified community. Civil society was active in support of the peace process, though it was largely managed at the political level. However, since the 1998 Agreement physical segregation remains at a very high level in schools, housing and cultural organisations. Civil society, especially at community level, is also quite segregated, reflecting where people live. There are of course integrated civil society groups – largely meeting and functioning in more neutral spaces in town and city centres. But the capacity of civil society to play an integrating role remains limited. Germane to our discussion, this means there is limited possibility for *autogestion*, or for space to play a more important role in participatory development.

#### 4. Lessons from the comparison of the two cases

Notwithstanding the good examples of progress, however, both our cases show difficulty related to physical spaces. In our two case examples, the use, or inability to use physical spaces as shared spaces has been an important factor in political progress. In Kerala, the creation of shared social settings in schools, reading rooms and other social spaces provided a significant physical manifestation of public policy which sought to overcome social segregation. When there was a crisis to the economic, social and political development in the 1980s, there were conscious efforts from the state and civil society organisations alike to make further progress on desegregation through initiatives like the People’s Plan, devolving more autonomy to local administrations and grassroots organisations. Following the rise of the Hindu-right, attempts to re-impose segregation in temples and other public spaces was a very high-profile aspect of their political mobilisation. In Northern Ireland, despite a relatively successful peace process, there has been almost no de-segregation of education or public housing and public spaces in many areas remain off limits to the “other” community. While certain civil



Fig. 2. An Orange March in Derry. Picture: S. Harikrishnan, 2022



society groups, including the women's movement, have the capacity to draw activists from both political communities, and work to promote horizontal linkages between them, they presently lack the required support, including funding, to be able to do this effectively.

There are two implications arising from this analysis of Northern Ireland and Kerala, drawing from the experience in the last three decades. Firstly, it re-enforces the argument that a "top-down" technical approach alone, which does not recognise and deal with power dynamics, will not succeed in understanding social relations in society. While the role of governments, institutions and international organisations is crucial, there are practical challenges and limitations to a purely state-centric approach towards development, especially in societies with a history of social divisions. In Kerala, informal and non—or semi—institutional physical spaces at community level were essential to making progress on caste and gender-based exclusions. In Northern Ireland, the low level of shared physical spaces, has limited the community-wide impact of political power-sharing at elite level.

Secondly, and consequently, an attempt to create a more participatory understanding of development would mean a shift of attention "towards issues of power and politics", to encompass processes of negotiation, co-existence and friendship, as well as "tension and hostility" (Williams and McConnell, 2011). This also means a focus on community and grassroots movements that can create broad-based, inclusive and secular spaces that nurture everyday lived experiences, fostering qualities like trust, friendships, tolerance and empathy which are crucial for good community-relations. Such social networks can be pivotal during a potential re-emergence of conflict at the local level, when communities fall back on interpersonal relationships that have been forged at the community levels, often perceived as separate from the realm of institutionalised politics (Williams, 2007; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). In Kerala, decades of positive integration of physical spaces is a very powerful local counter-balance to political attempts from the Hindu right to re-impose segregation. In Northern Ireland, civil society led a breakthrough to de-escalate tensions during marches in Derry's public spaces. In East Belfast, as we have seen, civil society has shown some potential to address divisions on cultural issues in strongly unionist areas, but the strong impact of physical segregation, and resistance to de-segregation from conservative and hard-line unionists has limited their ability to grow.

These two implications are seen in practical political challenges concerning space in both contexts. Firstly, at the elite level, a formal politics of sharing space in official policy documents, in both Northern Ireland and India, often does not reflect the reality of a deeply divided and competitive party politics (A Shared Future, 2005; "The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement: The Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations" 1998; T. Isaac, 2005). There is no opposition to sharing "in principle", but once it is applied to an individual situation, political contestation begins. In Northern Ireland this was seen in response to efforts to promote the Irish language, or the equal recognition of Irish and British identity, while in Kerala it is seen increasingly in the closing off of shared spaces around temples, public grounds and on streets. At the elite level therefore, formal support for sharing space in policy documents masks a continuing contestation, where for hard-line, traditional unionists in Northern Ireland or the Hindu-right in Kerala a "shared" space is a "lost" space. Secondly, the "participatory turn" within political science indicates the possibilities opened up by shared spaces at an everyday-level in forging better social relations. Questions of access to or control over land and public spaces is often seen as a matter of contention in societies where multiple identities (caste, religious, sectarian) are at play. This study suggests that a more grassroots focused approach, which avoids over-glamourising civil society and which recognises the social basis of division, needs to include the "where" of participation to be successful.

## 5. Conclusion

Both Kerala and Northern Ireland are complex societies that deal with different historical and contextual situations. This paper does not attempt to reduce these different contexts to claim a universal solution to successful participatory governance. But it compares the trajectory of change in the two regions, and claims that Kerala's relative success in shaping a secular and inclusive socio-economic developmental model has at its core, the creation of a new spatiality that allows for the creation of shared informal spaces that cut across sectarian divides. This experience—of creating broad-based grassroots organisations that are inclusive, and the creation of shared social physical spaces—was crucially important in the post-1990s period, when the region responded to the changing neoliberal turn. In Northern Ireland, meanwhile, the post-GFA political solution did not succeed in ending segregated physical spaces either in settings such as sports groups and facilities or public spaces, and the progress on institutional or informal interactions across communities has been very limited. At least partially, the continued segregation in Northern Ireland can be attributed to the limited potential of grassroots organisations to create mixed spaces at an everyday level. Both the re-imagining of state-civil society relations, and the expansion of the ambit of studying institutional spaces themselves, is crucial while assessing the success of development in contemporary times.

The debate on desegregating divided societies needs to move beyond its focus on (the important) area of shared government, and also include a strong focus on the sharing of physical spaces. This is because, as we have argued, the true potential of transformative politics includes a study of "participatory spaces" beyond the North/South, private/public and formal/informal binaries. At a time when a reconfiguration of state-society relations is taking place and "new democratic spaces" are opening up (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007), a study of (alternative) democratic potential includes effective planning from authorities (Glaeser et al., 2021), but also—as we have argued in this paper—revisiting socio-spatial relations as well. Such an approach has obvious implications for the emergence of "critical land administration studies".

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**John Doyle:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Harikrishnan Sasi-kumar:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

## Data Availability

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