

A Decade of Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC) : the evolution of an Auroville institution

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Mother gave broad and clear directives that form the basis of Auroville's socio-economic organization and vision: a communal economy with no private property and no exchange of money between community members, each of whom would contribute to the collective in one of three ways – work, kind, or money – and whose basic needs, would, in turn, be provided for by the community.

Pour Tous, founded in 1974, was the first communal Auroville institution to act as an anchor for that envisaged ideal economy. The community's first collective provisioning operation, it began by providing a basket of basic needs in kind to all Aurovilians at no cost. However, with the emergence of the maintenance system in 1983, Pour Tous decisively shifted from a communally-funded to an individualized and monetized model of food distribution. At first, each individual or family was given an account in which to deposit funds, and encouraged to deposit these in advance of their food requirements to facilitate bulk purchasing. The system eventually came to operate as a standard grocery store. The community basket service phased out, each person or family shopped individually and paid for each item taken, and a profit margin came to be included in the prices.

In the early 2000s, funding for a new facility for Pour Tous located in the centre of the city prompted a group of concerned individuals dissatisfied with the fact that Pour Tous, as an institution, had devolved into a shop – “

30 years to arrive to the point where we were just selling and buying to each other!

” – to gather and reflect on how this new outlet could be run in a way that would re-affirm Auroville's evolution towards the communal economy it aspired for. In the words of one of these early stakeholders

“we realised that if we were not going to run this outlet as a community service without the exchange of money, because it was at the centre of Auroville we could say goodbye to Auroville as a society without the exchange of money, where people are supported, they give what they can in terms of work and involvement and they receive what they need without exchange on money - which is what it's supposed to be.” (Nicole)

The model that emerged was a community cooperative, in which members would contribute a certain amount monthly, and then take whatever they felt they needed, without paying for the individual items provided, which would be limited to 'basic needs.' The service would be centrally-supported, and not self-supporting, meaning that the cost of operation, overhead expenses and the maintenances of Aurovilians working in the service, would be borne by the collective – the City Services budget administered by the BCC (at the time “Central Fund” administered by the “Economy Group”).

The concept was presented to the Economy Group. One hundred and sixty people were ready to participate in the experiment. However, it was strongly challenged for a number of reasons. It was argued that fully supported services were too much of a drain on the collective economy; the PTDC model did not warrant collective funds as it was based on membership; and the model of participation would likely be abused – people would take more than they contributed, and City Services would have to cover the losses.

After difficult meetings, the Economy Group decided to award the new Pour Tous a small budget – 17,000Rs a month– and a time for experimentation. The service began to operate in 2006 with many Aurovilians working there on a voluntary basis, and membership more than doubled in the first year. At the end of that year, the Economy Group called for a General Meeting to determine whether the experiment should continue to run and be supported by the Central Fund. The community at large chose to go forward with the project. Ten years later, PTDC operates as a centrally-supported service, with a monthly budget of Rs 53,000 allocated by the BCC. Membership has grown to 1300 people, which represents the majority of the Auroville population.

The Model

Participants choose from one of three fixed monthly contributions, as approximates their needs. The standard (medium) contribution was determined on the basis of the in-kind 'lunch scheme' allocation of the City Services maintenance. The funds are collected into a single common account and are used to purchase a range of items according to certain criteria that correspond to the category of 'basic needs,' as determined by PTDC management. Participants may select any of the items available in the cooperative, and their selection is tracked at a checkout counter – for stocktaking purposes and to monitor the usage of each participant – although no statement is provided.

Participants are expected to contribute in relationship to their usage, which is posted three times a month on the public notice board at the entrance of the cooperative on the 16th, 26th and last day of each month. Usage represents the tally of the cost of the items selected that month by the participant to date. Participants who consistently “overuse” are requested to increase their contribution, and participants who have more and need less are invited to contribute beyond their usage to support those who have less and need more. All items at PTDC are made available to participants at cost-price. This does not include any operational expenses of the service (i.e. transport, maintenances, infrastructure repairs), since these are covered by City Services.

No item in PTDC carries a price, as the service would like people to focus on their needs without being influenced by the price of items. However, a binder with the price list for all PTDC items is available for people to consult. One of the key criteria for the selection of items available at PTDC is affordability, so that individuals subsisting on the modest Auroville maintenance – the economic demographic PTDC is particularly designed to serve – would be able to provide for their daily life while remaining within their PTDC contribution budget. Aside from affordability, other criteria for selection of goods reflect “conscious” consumer choices: health, quality and eco-friendliness.

PTDC attempts to strike a balance between meeting people's needs without upholding a uniformity of needs while at the same time not encouraging a “consumer society,” by offering a small range of items per category. Auroville products are prioritized, and several Auroville commercial units offer their goods at cost or at a discount[S1]. In addition, PTDC operates a volunteer-run kitchen that provides a daily lunch to participants at cost price, and a recycling centre for re-usable containers of the items it carries.

In Practice: Celebrations & Challenges

What does the PTDC model achieve, in practice? Opinions strongly differ when it comes to PTDC's economic set-up and functioning. Some feel that PTDC represents a significant step towards the future of the Auroville economy in terms of the realization of its ideals. They highlight PTDC as the first major breakthrough towards an economy with no exchange of money, in contrast with previous experiments. Uma, a participant and member of the Economy Action Group and commercial unit executive, states

“What this new Pour Tous has done is it's managed to make a certain entry into that new economy and held it. It has crossed over this survival crunch... it has landed in the consciousness of people. And that I find a space for celebration.”

Ann, a participant who managed Pour Tous from 1983 to 1990, considers PTDC to be

“the future of the Auroville economy;”

“In any case of what I call the base economy – food, education, health... I think PTDC will one day cover all this, and perhaps even go further.”

When asked what it is about the PTDC experience that inspires support, participants point to how PTDC fulfils the mandate of meeting the basic needs of Aurovilians–

“...it allows the collective to transcend a survival space, which in an economy is always – “how much,” “how I live,” “what are my living costs” - and the whole life revolves around this self-pity of living. For me, PTDC allows me to transcend that... PTDC gives me that freedom to look at life in another level. And I’m utterly grateful.” (Uma)

They also see it as a step towards no exchange of money in Auroville,

“For me I couldn’t care less at the end of the month when my balance is positive that it goes to the common pot, I find that fantastic... It’s no longer me or you, we are one. We are one. It’s the collective.” (Ann)

Others, however, fail to see how the economic model of PTDC is a move towards “no exchange of money” or a collective economy, because each person still contributes in money, their consumption is individually tracked on the basis of the cost of the items they select, and they are expected to contribute more if their expenditure does not meet their budget. However, several participants raised the point that this criticism indicated a failure not of PTDC itself, but of the present Auroville maintenance system provided primarily in money and channelled into individual accounts, with which individuals are left largely to provide for their basic needs.

Another point of contention is PTDC’s ‘no pricing policy’. Despite there being a binder in the cooperative with a pricing list, and people’s usage being posted three times a month, some participants feel that not having individual items’ prices marked and not receiving itemized statements makes it challenging for them to be conscious about their usage. This they consider to be counterproductive:

“I have never understood how the ‘no exchange of money’ idea of PTDC precludes putting the price on items. Especially when everyone is expected to keep within the limits of the monthly contribution that they make. With this expectation, why refuse to put the one piece of information on each item that will help participants to keep within their budget?” (Priya)

Others feel that it is an advantage not to see the prices because it allows them to relate differently to their provisioning; that having PTDC track their expenditure for them is another step towards a communally organized economy, and that being alerted when they reach the limits of their budget is “necessary at this stage of our consciousness.” Ann expresses that it also encourages each participant to be conscious:

“it forces us to be conscious about what we are doing.... There are people who complain afterwards, saying how come you don’t show the prices? It is up to us to be conscious. And this is why I like this PTDC. It’s an adventure, also, of consciousness.”

PTDC manager Anandi recognizes that the decision not to price items so as to encourage participants to base their choices on need is a challenging experiment for many. For some, the exercise feels flawed because every item does have a cost.

A Participatory Platform

What PTDC has emerged as is a platform to which Auroville’s commercial units feel they can contribute effectively and directly to the community – something that is inspired by PTDC’s track-record of management transparency and efficiency. Paul and Laura, executives of Maroma, note that the spirit of service behind PTDC, concretized in the model of offering items at cost price exclusively to Aurovilians, enables them to offer Maroma products to the community where there were no channels through which to do so otherwise. As such, they consider that PTDC could become one of the main actors anchoring the communal economy Auroville strives for. Several unit executives with profitable businesses expressed that they foresaw donating their products to PTDC in the (not too distant) future. In this way, the present PTDC is a preparation for what could eventually become a communal cooperative with no exchange of money for the goods themselves – and so no exchange of money at all, whereas currently it operates on the basis of no exchange of money for services rendered.

PTDC has also created a viable avenue through which individual community members who have the means and inclination to do so can contribute to the collective. Several PTDC participants mentioned feeling very positively about not using up the total of their contribution, knowing it would go into the collective pot. PTDC makes appeals to the participants at large when collective usage is higher than collective contributions, and people come forward offering to make a higher monthly contribution because they know it will be helpful to others. Many also contribute in work and in kind, in addition to money – bringing fruits and vegetables from their home gardens or orchards and volunteering in the cooperative, often in the kitchen – so that, interestingly, PTDC creates a space through which people do participate in the three specific ways Mother delineated for Auroville.

Regardless of whether people consider that the economic model of PTDC is a step in the direction of the socio-economic ideals of the community, participants feel a sense of intention and connection manifest in the cooperative which would ideally be the aspiration of any Auroville institution striving to actualize the township’s overarching mandate: the evolution of consciousness.

One thing that all participants seem to experience and that differentiates PTDC from any other outlet, is that the atmosphere feels more “conscious” – something which people attribute to the selection of products, the intention and attitude of those working there, and the behaviour of other participants. People feel especially satisfied with the choice of Auroville goods because knowing and trusting the people producing these gives them a sense of connection to the items and to one another. Many note that the attitude of those working there – a team of exclusively Aurovilians, Newcomers and Volunteers, with no hired labour from outside the community – reflects a genuine dedication to their work, which reverberates into the atmosphere of PTDC as a whole, making it “energetically beautiful.”

The physical layout was intentionally designed with all shelving placed along the walls, leaving a largely free and empty space in the middle so that people could comfortably interact. People greet and converse with one another, many eating together at shared tables thanks to PTDC’s popular and much appreciated lunch service. The cooperative has emerged as an active hub of community life, a place to “check in with the community” and its “current vibe.”

Everyone recognizes that PTDC is a work in progress that requires evolution to continue to support the community in progressing towards its ideals. Perhaps its most significant social contribution is not basic provisioning for community members, but connecting and enabling Aurovilians to participate in shaping and embodying the conscious society each aspires for.

[S1] Alan I thought so too but this is the reality at present, as explained to me by Anandi

(Adapted from the academic article:

“PTDC: Auroville’s Communal Cooperative as Participatory Platform for Conscious Citizenship”)