



Decentralization and Local Governance in Ethiopia

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Introduction

Just a century and half ago Ethiopia was only 45% of its present size. In addition; owing to the rugged and broken topography of the country coupled with the pre-technological means of communication which made centralized administration impossible, Ethiopia was also a decentralized state. The key features of its decentralization were the co-existence of regional and local lords, princes, even kings who exercised power autonomously and a central throne whose suzerainty was recognised by the regional and local lords. Starting from 1855, however, processes of territorial expansion and centralization of power began in the country. The territorial expansion culminated in 1890s more than doubling the size and greatly diversifying the ethnic makeup of the country. The centralization process however continued until just a couple decades ago. Formal and practical measures were taken to centralize power by emperors such as Haile Selassie. Under the military government which deposed Emperor Haile Selassie 1974, the centralization process was taken to its extreme by putting the country under communist, militaristic totalitarian unitary rule.

The present regime (EPRDF) came to power 1991 by overthrowing the communist government after 17 years of civil war. Immediately after seizing power it began undoing the more than hundred years of centralization process in a two phased process of decentralization. The first phase was completed in 1995 when a new Constitution was promulgated establishing the country on ethnic federal basis. Accordingly nine regional states were established following the settlement patterns of the major ethnic group. In addition it recognised the right to self-government of each ethnic group and to that effect it provided that a government institution would be established for each nation, nationality and people of the country. The Constitution further recognized the right to secession of the nation and nationalities from the federal system.

Local government in Ethiopia; Constitutional Status

The debate for the second phase of decentralization, i.e. local level decentralization, began at the drafting stage of the 1995 Constitution. At that stage the status and powers of local government was at issue. Some argued that the structure and powers of local government should be provided for in the federal Constitution. Others argued that the matter pertaining to local government should be left to the regions. In the end a compromise was reached. Thus under the federal Constitution an obligation was imposed on the regional states to establish local government and to provide it with adequate powers. However the structure of the local government and the exact powers and functions that were to be devolved to it were left for the regions to determine. In 1995 the biggest four states (Amahara, Oromia, Tigray and SNNP) soon followed by the other states, established a three tiered local administration through their constitutions. In 2001, again the above four states, followed by the other states, amended their constitutions and re-structured their local administration and devolved more power to local level.

Local government institutions

Presently Ethiopia has a three tiered local government; *zonal, woreda and kebele* administration; the *kebele* administration being the lowest level local administrative institution.

Generally zonal administration is not an autonomous administrative institution. It is just a branch of the regional governments that is established at zonal level, holding a number of *woredas* in it. Zonal administration is provided with certain powers and functions by the regional government by way of deconcentration. There are 66 zonal administrations in the country. A zonal administration, generally, does not have representative council. It is rather run by appointees of the head of the regional government. The most important function of the zonal administration is liaising between the *woreda* administrations and the regional administration. It also coordinates the works of the *woreda* administrations within the zone and provides them with technical assistance.

In Amahara, Gambella and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional states, at zonal level, what is commonly referred to as 'nationality administration' is established. It is established in accordance with art 39(3) of the federal Constitution which guarantees the right to self-government to each ethnic group and that requires the establishment of government institution to same.

As was mentioned above Ethiopia's federalism is an ethnic based and, thus, the regional states were established following the geographical settlement patterns of the major ethnic groups in the country. Yet there are a number of regional minority ethnic groups within each state. It was, thus, to accommodate these regional ethnic minorities and to allow them exercise self-determination in form territorial autonomy that nationality administrations were established. Nationality administration is recognised, below the federal and regional government, as the highest political organ of the ethnic group that it is established for. Nationality administration has a representative council and an executive organ. The executive organ is comprised of a chief administrator who is elected by the representative council and other members who are appointed by the chief administrator with the approval of the representative council.

Below zonal administration there is a *woreda* administration. A *Woreda* administration is the most important local administrative institution under the Ethiopian local governance system. It is established by all regional states on a geographical area in which approximately 100, 000 or more people reside. Presently there are 557 *woredas* throughout the country. A *woreda* has a representative council and an executive council. The representative council, which is called *woreda* council, is comprised of elected officials. It has also a *woreda* administrative council, the executive organ of the *woreda* administration, which is comprised of a *woreda* administrator who is elected by the *woreda* council from among its members and other members who are appointed by the *woreda* administrator upon the approval of the *woreda* council.

The lowest level of local administration is the *kebele* administration. It is established in a geographical area which is inhabited with 10,000 or more people. The *kebele* administration has a representative council called *kebele* council and an executive body which is referred to as *kebele* administrative council.

Powers and functions of local government

The Zonal administration, as was pointed out, acts with deconcentrated power, as agents of the regional government. Its main function is to coordinate the works of different *woredas* under it and liaise between the regions and the *woredas*. The zonal administration that are established for regional minority ethnic groups in Amhara, Gambella and SNNPR though recognised as the highest political organ of the ethnic group concerned, have no clear competences, save determining the working language of the zone

The regional constitutions invariably provide that the *woreda* and *kebele* administrations have the power to draft and implement their own plans regarding the *woreda*'s or the *kebele*'s economic development and social services and administrative matters. However the economic development and social service matters which are under the jurisdiction of the *woreda* and the *kebele* are not clearly provided for in the constitutions. The distinction between the competences of the regional administration, the *woredas* and the *kebeles* is vague. In practice the *woreda* works in the area of primary education, primary health care, rural water supply and rural roads. However these competences are not provided for in the state constitutions or any framework legislation. They are exercised based on political considerations. As almost all the *woredas* and *kebeles* are controlled by the ruling party there is no much of a controversy about who does what for now. But when and if the opposition parties manage to control local government the vagueness in the in allocation of functional competences among the different level of government is likely to cause much disagreement.

Financial sources

Under the regional constitutions the *woredas* are given the power to adopt their annual budget. The constitutions also provide that the *woredas* can make use of sources of revenues which are not administered by the state government. However, the regions have retained almost all revenues sources which they are authorized to make use of under the federal Constitution.

The *woredas* collect land use fees and agriculture income taxes. However the proceeds are transferred to the states treasuries. The only reliable financial source of *woredas and kebeles* is the block grant that they get from the regional administration. The block grant covers around 83% of the *woredas* budget.

Staff Appointment

Woreda administrations have formal authority to hire and fire their own personnel. However, as the salary they afford to pay is not attractive, they are suffering from acute shortage of qualified man power. According to a recent study conducted by the World Bank around 43% of approved *woreda* positions are vacant. The qualification of those who are employed is poor, limited to highs school studies. Even when staffs with better qualifications are employed, there is a mismatch between their area of specialization and their job assignment.

Autonomy

According to government policy documents, *woreda* administrations are supposed to be autonomous administrative units. However without clear functions and internal financial sources, one can hardly speak of *woreda* autonomy. In addition as all local governments are controlled by the ruling party and by other ethnic based parties, which are, at least allegedly, invented by the ruling party itself, and as decisions within the ruling party are made in a centralized manner, one cannot speak of local autonomy.

The practices also support the above assertion. Under the regional constitutions zonal administration is provided with the responsibility of coordinating and assisting the *woredas*. As some studies show, however, the *woredas* are under tight control of the zonal administration. They do not have fiscal autonomy. As the *woredas* get much of their revenue (83%) from the regional government, they are required to get their budgets approved by the zonal administrations. According to a study conducted in the Amhara region an expenditure exceeding 30,000 Ethiopian Birr (R2000) needs the approval of zonal administration. Any economic and social plan of a *woreda* needs to be submitted to zonal administration for approval.

Central supervision

There is no a legal framework of supervision in place which defines the supervisory role over local government of the national governments. The regional governments however exercise some form supervision through the zonal administration. There is a practice of periodical supervisory evaluation conducted by zonal administration the legal basis of which is not clear. Even if the declared intention of this evaluation is to ensure accountability and responsiveness of elected *woreda* officials to the electorate and to investigate alleged corruption and abuse of authority, in practice it is also used to remove party members whose allegiance has become questionable. In addition, as was indicated above the financial dependences of the *woredas* on regional government have exposed them to a tight control and intrusion from the regional government. The fact that almost all local government institutions are controlled by the ruling party put local administration under a strict centralized party oversight.

Key challenges

As in many jurisdictions, the most difficult challenge for Ethiopian local government is capacity. The local government institutions of the country, as was pointed out, have acute shortage of qualified man power. The dominance of all local government institution by the ruling party has diminished the role that local government could have played in embedding

democracy at grassroots level. The lack interest of the opposition parties in local government is also another challenge for the democratization process at local level.