

**ASSESSMENT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF WOREDA
DECENTRALIZATION IN GAMBELLA PEOPLE'S NATIONAL REGIONAL
STATE, ETHIOPIA: THE CASE OF ABOBO AND LARE WOREDAS**

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Abstract

This research is concerned with the assessment on the implementation of woreda decentralization in Gambella Peoples National Regional State with particular emphasis to Abobo and Lare woredas. It attempted to explore the objectives, legal and institutional frameworks and implementation status of the recently embarked DLDP and fiscal decentralization in the Gambella region. Secondly, the study provided a modest preliminary investigation of some performance indicators of the program in terms of power and authority, local governance processes, inter-governmental relations, financial and administrative capacities, planning and budgeting processes, community participation and basic service delivery trends with particular reference to the two woredas. Finally, the study tried to illustrate some of the major inherent and encountered problems and the possible prospects of the program. To meet the above objectives, the research employed more of qualitative case study approach. Both primary and secondary data sources were used in gathering pertinent information. The technique of collecting primary data includes in-depth interviews at regional, woreda and kebele levels, focus group discussions with the community and personal observation. Secondary sources are published and unpublished materials such as books, different reports and manuals that cover federal to the woreda. Descriptive method of analysis is used to analyze the primary and secondary data. The study found out that decentralization in general and woreda decentralization in particular had not been implemented adequately due to several reasons. It is challenged by many problems such as inadequate devolution of power, limited decisions-making authority and autonomy transferred to local governments, absence of political will and commitment to devolve power in real sense, lack of legal and institutional framework, poor inter-governmental relations and weak coordination with different stakeholders, upward accountability and absence of transparency in the operation of local governments, shortage of resources (skilled human power and material), limited administrative, institutional and technical local capacities, weak budgeting and expenditure administration, poor revenue generating capacity and heavy financial dependency on federal and regional governments, and weak public sector service deliveries. Regarding participation, there is low level of community participation in different sectors at the stage of problem identification, prioritization of needs, planning and budgeting processes and decision making activities at regional and local levels. Hence, to make decentralization meaningful and benefits of woreda decentralization to be realized, recommendations are made on power and authority, political commitments, legal and institutional frameworks, capacity issues, inter-governmental relations, accountability, transparency, financial and human resources and community participation.

Keywords: Woreda Decentralization, Local Governance, Planning and Budgeting, Community Participation and Service Delivery.

Introduction

After decades of highly centralized and unitary political system and administrative setup, Ethiopia has been following federal system of government and decentralization policy of regional and local governance and democratization process immediately after the downfall of the military regime (the Dergue) in 1991.

The decentralization drive in Ethiopia has proceeded in two phases: Mid-level and District Level Decentralization. The woreda decentralization program was initially launched in 430 woredas covering the four major regions of Amhara, Oromia, Tigray and SNNPR, but was subsequently to be implemented in the other regions as well (Meheret, 2007).

There is broad consensus that devolving power and authority to woredas is a key to local empowerment and meaningful self-government. However, the full impact of the government's woreda decentralization program and the challenges faced in instituting democratic governance structures has not been properly assessed. It requires an area specific and thorough assessment (Kumera, 2006). The value added of woreda decentralization needs to be rigorously examined in order to better understand the implications of the recent move in decentralization (Tegegne, 2007).

Decentralization in general is an emerging issue and is introduced relatively recently in Ethiopia. As a result, only few researches are available on the subject. When it is perceived as a region wise, it is inexperienced in the Gambella region. Since its establishment as a region in 1992, the GPNRS has launched different decentralization schemes with the intent to improve the overall performance of the region. One important area where decentralization hinged on is the implementation of DLDP which was started in the region in 2004/05.

An evaluation of the practical role of the hitherto schemes of woreda decentralization is worthwhile. Unfortunately, not enough has been done in this regard. Assessments made by independent institutions and researchers do not yet give sufficient insight into the practice of decentralization in the Gambella region. There is no major study that focuses on the practice of woreda decentralization in the region. The extent to which DLDP has been implemented and whether it had brought any meaningful changes in GPNRS is not yet well known.

Therefore, the study attempts to assess the implementation of woreda decentralization in GPNRS. It examines the evolution, practices, constraints and prospects of woreda decentralization by selecting two local governments: Lare and Abobo woredas. With these, it is hoped that the study will fill the gap by giving a glimpse about the role of woreda decentralization in the region since its implementation.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to assess the implementation and progress of decentralization in general and of woreda decentralization in particular in GPNRS for selected study areas by concentrating on parameters like power devolution, capacity, finance (budget and its adequacy), planning, community participation and service delivery.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To examine the extent to which the Gambella region has devolved powers, functions and resources to lower levels of government and determine at which level that functions and responsibilities are concentrated;
- To examine the local governance process and important aspects of inter-governmental relations;
- To assess the financial and administrative capacities of woredas to carry out the tasks of local economic development and provision of socio-economic services;
- To assess the planning and budgeting process, level of community participation and trends of service delivery in selected sectors;
- To assess the major constraints and prospects related to the practical implementation of woreda decentralization;
- Based on the findings of the research, forward viable recommendations.

Methodology

The Research Method

There are several types of research methods in social research to choose from. For the sake of this study, case study approach is employed. This is because the aim of the study is to provide and collect more information and get a deeper understanding and multiple interpretations of the dynamics of decentralization process and implementation of woreda decentralization in GPNRS. This method has the strength of dealing with and a full variety of evidence from documents, interviews, and focus group discussions. Thus, the study employed more of qualitative case study approach.

Sampling Design and Selection of Study Area

In order to assess the state of decentralization, the woreda level administration and sector offices are taken as units of analysis for the study. This is because woredas are considered as closer to the grassroots population and being practical unit of government for meaningful socio-economic development at the local level. Two woredas (Abobo and Lare) are being chosen purposively as the sample of the study. The woredas were selected for reasons of convenience to the researcher in view of data collection due to its accessibility & proximity. Abobo woreda represents urban woredas in the region, while Lare woreda represents rural woredas for comparative analysis. Generally, from the viewpoint of political, economic and social activities, the two woredas are the core and better representative of their zones in particular and the region in general.

Data Types and Sources

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected from in-depth interview, focus group discussions and field observation. Secondary data were collected from published and unpublished materials available in the form of journal articles, proclamations, government policy briefs, federal and regional constitutions, regulations, annual plans, and performance reports.

Methods of Data Collection

In-depth interviews: were conducted with key informants who are from different tiers (Regional, Woreda and Kebele) of government bureaus/offices. The informants were selected according to their expertise in the subject under investigation. They are only targeted those with the right information or knowledge on issues of decentralization and its implementation at the woreda level due to their experience, political position or professional capacity.

Focus group discussions: two FGD were held in Abobo and Lare woredas with the community members from different backgrounds of status, age and sex.

Observation: In contemporary field research, observation is the most important technique to collect original data. This is because sometimes the information that the researcher gather from the informants may contradict with that of the real situation. The researcher, while stayed in Gambella for over a month to collect the data, had the opportunity to watch, listen and communicate informally with the staff members of various offices at various levels at the regional and woreda levels. The researcher had also the chance to observe corresponding official letters between the woreda and regional government.

Method of Data Analysis

The researcher mainly used descriptive survey method to analyze the primary and secondary data. Since the data collected are qualitative and quantitative in nature, the research relies on both quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Different tables, percentages, simple averages and figures and thematic narrative were used to comprehend, analyze, interpret and explain the findings of the study. To achieve the maximum validity of the data, the researcher employed triangulation method.

Results and discussion

The Process of Decentralization in Gambella Region

The GPNRS was established in 1992 following the promulgation of the transitional period charter, which delivered the region for the right to administer its own affairs within its own defined territory. DLDP has been implemented in GPNRS since 2004/05 with the aim of deepening the devolution of power to the lower tiers of regional governments, to institutionalize decision-making processes at the grassroots level with a view to enhance grassroots participation, to promote good governance through inspiring transparency, accountability, and to improve decentralized service delivery to the public.

However, the region was not aware of the DLDP program and its preparations at national level up until they were told to implement without prior knowledge and preparation. In relation to the awareness of the program at woreda and kebele levels, the study found out that there is limited awareness about the program in general. Apart from the FDRE (1995) and the GPNRS revised (2002) constitutions, there are no other legal or specific policy frameworks or even manual to direct the implementation of DLDP in the region. The program has been implemented without detailed legal base indicating the mandates, responsibilities and authority of local governments, the relationship (supervision, reporting, monitoring and evaluation, etc) between local and regional governments, and relationship among the local governments. The institutions implementing DLDP in the Gambella region at regional and local levels are not clearly defined and their legal bases are almost non-existent. There is no working group which is established for implementing the program.

Powers and Functions

The GPNRS has established a four tier administrative structure: the region, nationality zones, administrative woredas and kebeles. The structures, powers and functions of various organs (council, cabinet and courts) of the different tiers of governments are clearly stated in the revised 2002 constitution of the GPNRS. But the constitution has not mentioned clearly the functional responsibilities between the regional and *woreda* levels. This implies that there is no clear demarcation of responsibilities among the tiers of the regional administrative units.

The FDRE constitution determines the powers, functions and responsibilities to regions. The Regional government of GPNRS has given all powers and functions which are not provided to the federal government alone or joint to the federal and state governments. Zonal administrations considered as intermediate tiers of government between region and woreda. They do not have legally recognized tier of government with constitutionally mandated powers and structure as self-governing entity. Zones have coordinating and supervisory authorities over woreda administrations on behalf of the region. This implies that they are considered as de-concentrated administrative units of the regional government. Zonal administrations are only established for regional minority ethnic groups in Gambella region and recognized as the highest political organ of the ethnic group, which determine the working language of the zone.

The woreda administrations have the power to prepare and decide on economic development and social services, plans and implement policies and directives issued by the regional state and zone organs. The authority of the woredas to carry out their functions has been further enhanced since 2004/05 woreda decentralization initiative. But, most of the powers enshrined in the regional constitution to woredas are good only in the constitution document in the shelf except that the council members meet for approving the annual plans and budget. Some of the powers are still centralized at regional and zonal levels. Woredas enjoyed little fiscal or administrative autonomy to respond to the local needs of their constituencies.

There is also an interference of regional and zonal governments over the powers of woreda governments. Sometimes the appointment of the woreda administrative council like the Chief Administrator, Deputy Chief Administrator and heads of line sector offices can be done through letters of the regional government and even also be made by the regional president. There is a great deal of supervision and control by regional governments over woredas affairs. Most capital projects have been carried out by the regional sector bureaus. There are many problems to execute the powers and functions which the constitution provided to the woredas. There are lack of clarity about the responsibilities of zonal governments and the woredas, shortage of skilled manpower and financial capacity to carry out their roles and little capacity to raise revenues.

Fiscal Decentralization at the Regional and Woreda levels

Expenditure Assignment: Expenditure assignment for the DLDP of Gambella region lacks clarity and formality. The regional revised constitution fails to clearly define the expenditure responsibilities of the lower level governments. As a result, when we see the share of expenditures by levels of government, the regional level sector bureaus play a dominant role in the decision of expenditures. Particularly, almost all decisions on capital expenditures are under the domain of regional level sector bureaus.

E.g. both zones and woredas spend 62.59 percent of total recurrent expenditure and 7.25 percent of total capital expenditure. The regional sector bureaus and offices spend 92.75 percent of

capital expenditure. When we see the public expenditure trend (2005/06-2009/10), on average recurrent and capital expenditures were 88.3% and 11.7% respectively. The share of recurrent expenditure is extremely higher than capital expenditure which is largely due to an increase in the salary and other allowance of civil servants. And the newly started government structure has increased the volume and scale of civil servants and their salary, particularly at the *woreda* level. Regarding with sectoral allocation of expenditure, on average the administrative and general sector is (44.1%), the economic sector (17.32%) and social sector (38.41%). This shows that the region gave emphasis on building construction for key regional sector bureaus and fulfilling the necessary office accommodation. This leads to reducing the share of economic and social sectors but in recent years priority has given for economic and social services.

Revenue Assignment: The GPNRS revised constitution has defined the revenue sources of the region. But it fails to identify revenue sources that are further decentralized to lower level governments. The power to decide on the revenue sources of the region is assigned to the Regional Government. It is only the authority of the regional government to decide on rates and bases in the region. The *woredas* cannot decide to raise revenue according to the development needs of the community by changing the tax rate and base. The *woreda* government can only collect revenue for selected areas such as personal income from *woreda* employees and small traders, rural land use fee and agricultural income tax. Thus, the proportion of own revenue to the total regional budgetary revenue is very small. During the last five years, the regional government has covered on average less than 13% of its expenditure from its own revenue collections. That is, the overall envelop of the region's budgetary revenue indicates high dependence on federal subsidy which covers 87.2%.

Intergovernmental Transfer is a major source of revenue. The dependency of *woredas* on regional transfer/subsidy is more or less the same as that of the region to the federal. The share of own revenue to the total *woredas* budget is 14.83% while the share of regional transfers to *woredas* budget is 85.17%. This indicates the vulnerability of local governments to the manipulation of the regional government. The main reasons for weak fiscal position of *woredas* is scarcity of revenue sources or their narrow tax base as a result, they covered only smaller portion of their expenditure. The Gambella region allocated unconditional block grant transfer to *woredas* on the basis of grant formula.

Specific to the study *woredas* (Abobo and Lare), related to composition of the budget the proportion of the capital budget is insignificant while the recurrent budget, particularly the salary and other administrative expenditures contribute the largest portion (more than 95%) of the total annual budget of *woredas*. There is low budget for capital/development projects and expansion of public services. There is lacks equity in terms of fairness in sectoral allocation of the budget. There are great variations in the allocation of budget for different economic and social sectors of the economy. Revenue generating capacity is poor due to low powers and tax bases. In terms of intergovernmental transfers, *woredas* are highly dependent on regional transfers for their annual budgets.

Local Governance Process

Accountability: There is an upward accountability of the woreda governments to regional level organs and officials. This is because of the existing political structure at lower levels of government that has become personalized rather than being institutional. There is also lack of awareness/orientation and indifference of the community over the operations of woreda governments. In general, traditional instruments used for ensuring accountability such as opposition parties, transparent and free regular elections, a wide ranging and accessible Medias are inadequate in the region.

Transparency: There is lack of transparency in the activities of lower level governments. The community is unsatisfied about the transparency of planning process in both woredas. The people neither participate in the budgeting process nor have awareness about the allocation and execution of the budget. In terms of transparency in decision making, it is problematic in that the decisions are made secretly by the woreda cabinet members. It is not open to the public and even the implementation of those decisions is not always transparent. There are no established controls and procedures for financial information, accountability and audits in relation to the other sector offices. The possibility to have access to relevant information such as budgets, accounts and plans is also limited.

Capacity Issues: The decentralization process in the region have been challenged by serious capacity problems in terms of administrative, technical as well as resources (financial, manpower and material) to plan and implement their responsibilities to the satisfaction of the community. The region as a whole does not have adequate skilled manpower. The sector bureaus are persistently constrained by shortage of skilled manpower. At the woreda level there is shortage of manpower, high turnover of experienced and skilled staffs and inappropriate placement of manpower. There is also lack of qualification among the executive (cabinet) members of the woredas to plan, implement and manage appropriate social and economic development projects and basic public services in their locality.

Intergovernmental Relations

The revised GPNRS Constitution indicates four administrative tiers of government in the region. Although the constitutions and law stated the accountability of each tiers on paper, the actual practice in inter-governmental relation is not clear. The lines of authority and accountability between woreda, zone and regional government is not clearly defined. There is no legal or semi-legal document guiding the relationship between the different tiers of governments. This created a confusion of accountability and lack of transparency and interference between the tiers.

Officials who are at higher political positions of regional and zonal governments interfere in the powers of woredas. This has affected the autonomy of local governments. Though the law recognizes the formal independence of each tier of government, the governmental structure is generally characterized by the top-down modes of control and supervision. The existing relationship between local and regional governments includes periodic transfer of block grants to woredas, budget preparation supports, training programs, periodic reporting and ad-hoc supervisory inspections. To conclude, the woreda-regional relationship in general and among the different woredas in particular (in terms of administration, political, technical and fiscal dimensions) is not smooth.

Planning and Budgeting Process

The institutions involved in the planning and budgeting process are BoFED at regional level and OFED and sector offices at *woreda* level. The planning and budgeting process of most *woredas* has so far been done in a semi top-down approach in three grounds. First, form of indicative plans setting out priority areas from the region to be dealt with by *woredas*. Secondly, the block grant transferred to *woredas* are divided in three major parts of salary, petty cash and capital at regional level and thirdly, planning and budgeting experts are sent from the region to help the *woredas* in the technicalities of planning and budgeting process within the priority area.

The *woreda* executive (cabinet) committee and *woreda* council play the approving role of the budgets. Local governments however participated in providing input into the budget formulation and transfer process and in proposing project ideas in the planning process. They are not consulted in the budgetary decision making process and resource allocation that was done at the regional level. The lower levels of governments participate only in input delivery (information provision) and were not actively involved in allocation of decision making and budget execution, and have limited 'voice' in public expenditure decisions. There is passive participation of stakeholders in identifying problems and prioritizing needs in planning and budgeting process in *woredas*. Civil society organizations (NGOs, CBOs, etc), donors, women, kebele leaders and the public in *woreda* planning and budgeting, monitoring and evaluation processes of local development is virtually absent.

Community Participation

Respondents in both *woredas* indicated that the level of involvement of the larger community in identifying and setting priorities was too weak or almost nil. During the discussion, discussants revealed that there was no trend of involving the community to participate in planning and prioritizing their needs and deciding on different public sector delivery activities. Community participation at kebele levels is perceived as a contribution of materials and labor to development projects. There are no clear and established modalities of involving the community in the process of local development. The community has very low awareness in participating in different development and service activities. The role of people in the *woredas* in the process of decision making and provision of public services thereof is minimal at best.

Service Delivery

The study also found out that there are some improvements in the basic service delivery of the two study *woredas* from the perspective of quantity, coverage and beneficiary access at construction level. However, there are many problems in term of service giving and quality of the basic services constructed. *Woredas* are not giving the critically needed services to the community because of poor quality of construction that has led to the collapse of the building shortly after its completion and the absence of material and manpower required for the operation and functioning of the projects.

In general, though some improvements were witnessed in the nominal increase of basic service delivery after the implementation of *woreda* decentralization, it is difficult to conclude that this has brought significant changes in the major sectors of public service delivery.

This is because the real contribution of the *woreda* administration and the community for the improvements is very limited.

Most of the basic service facilities constructed in the study woredas are built by different organizations such as Pact Ethiopia, ERDP which is supported by UNDP, UNICEF, World Bank, etc. When the overall performance is measured by including the inputs of the regional, zonal and other actors such as NGOs, some improvements have been witnessed. However, when the inputs of actors outside the woreda institutions and other contributing factors or variables are disregarded, performance in the post-decentralization years in the woredas has not been impressive. Financial and skilled human power constraints and problems of coordination and participation of the people have contributed to the low performance of the woredas.

Constraints and Prospects of Woreda Decentralization

The major critical problems and challenges facing the implementation of woreda decentralization in the Gambella region are as follows.

- Inadequate devolution of power, limited decision-making authority and autonomy transferred to local governments,
- Absence of political will and commitment to devolve power in real sense,
- Lack of legal and institutional framework,
- Poor inter-governmental relations and weak coordination with different stakeholders,
- Upward accountability and absence of transparency in the operation of local governments,
- Shortage of basic resources (skilled human power and material), limited administrative, institutional and technical local capacities,
- Financial constraints such as weak budgeting and expenditure administration, poor revenue generating capacity and heavy dependence of woredas on regional government transfers,
- Weak public sector service deliveries,
- Low level of community participation at the regional and local levels,
- Infrastructural problems,
- Unfavorable weather condition and
- Political instability and ethnic conflicts in the region.

It is not easy to judge and project at this early stage, the prospects of success or failure of woreda decentralization in the region. However, based on its current status and implementation trends, the program is not properly contributing to its predetermined goals because of the above constraints. Though the program has brought some positive contributions, the prospect of the implementation of woreda decentralization would seem to depend primarily on the will to address and implement such concerns by different stakeholders at various levels.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is important to note here that generalizing about a given region from specific findings of two woredas is difficult. There is limited decision-making power transferred to lower level local governments. Woredas enjoyed little administrative autonomy to respond to the local needs of their constituencies.

Sufficient decision-making authority, responsibilities and resources were not given for woreda level administrations to empower them to live up to the expectations of the people for more and improved services. Woreda governments are heavily dependent on the regional government for budgets, which come in the form of block grants using a set of criteria. Community participatory development activities (in both financial and non-financial contributions) are at its infant stage

in the woredas under consideration. The practice of involving the larger community in identifying problems and overall planning activities is almost nonexistent. There is no significant effort in adjusting priorities according to local needs. The basic service delivery has relatively increased nominally after the DLDP implementation in the region. However, it is difficult to conclude that this has brought significant changes in the major sectors of public service delivery. In real terms the contribution of the woreda administration and the community for the improvements is very limited.

Based on the above discussions and findings of the study, the following recommendations are forwarded to have policy implications need to be considered.

- Woredas should have sufficient decision-making power and serve as autonomous units and manage the service provisions in their areas so as to maximize their benefits. The local government should be given full autonomy in the planning and budgeting activities according to their needs. Moreover, woreda governments should have the authority and autonomy to recruit, hire, appoint, transfer or dismiss local manpower which should be governed by local laws.
- For successful implementation of decentralization, the regional government in collaboration with local governments should formulate a strong legal framework setting out the powers, rights and duties of different government tiers in the region. There should be strong political commitment, leadership and dedication from the government and other concerned bodies both politically and in the allocation of the necessary human, material and financial resources. In addition, the regional government in collaboration with MCB should have to establish institutions at woreda levels that are responsible for the implementation of DLDP.
- For making the regional and local governments accountable and transparent to the people, citizens should elect those who rule them and have the possibility to assess their performance. This requires transparency of government actions and the possibility to have access to relevant information such as budgets, accounts and plans.
- The decentralization effort should first capacitate the region and local *woredas* with resources (human and material), administrative and technical capacities to help them evolve as viable and autonomous units of self ruled administrations. In addition, in order to minimize high staff turnover, the regional government should introduce positive and staff motivating incentive mechanisms so that the employees should be dedicated to the job for which they are assigned.
- Effective decentralization requires adequate financial strength. But the GPNRS is financially constrained due to its low revenue generating activities and low administrative capacities. The region cannot generate sufficient revenues from its own sources. Measures to increase the revenue base should be seriously emphasized by the regional government.
- The regional and local governments should consider community participation in all levels of decision making process. The political stability of the region is also something that bothers the development process. It is vital to resolve conflicts among the various ethnics that ensure peace and stability for the development process, and accelerating the decentralization process for creation of good governance at woreda level.
- Finally, the author recommends further complementary studies be conducted in the region on the subject matter in order to provide more conclusive findings over the direction and impact of the program using the findings of this study as an input.

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