

# The Exercise of Decentralized Local Governance Process in Gulomekeda Woreda, Tigray Region, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

With the coming to an end of the Cold War period in Africa people became familiar and aware of citizenship rights and obligations. They were better educated and well informed about the existing socio-economic and political conditions of their states and become in need to participate in public affairs but were constrained by the existing structures of governance. As part of the global move, initiation and accreditation of decentralized governance the Ethiopian government had also focused on decentralization of its administration to ensure locally driven development since 1991 in a formal way (Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2008; Abrham, 2011; Tilahun, 2014). The first was decentralization of powers and functions of the state to autonomous regional governments (Tilahun, 2014). However many states like Ethiopia have been witnessed challenged in bringing effective in socioeconomic development. Therefore this research undertaking is made to assess the exercise of local governance in ensuring community participation in Gulomekeda woreda as a focus of study. To come up with the required data pertinent to the research undertaking qualitative research methodology was employed. To select the sample respondents for the research both probability and non probability sampling designs were used. First to select the three sample Kebeles out of the 19 in the woreda the researcher had employed simple random sampling and particularly lottery method. Where as to select key informants and interviewees from different local institutions (Woreda and Kebele council members, woreda officials), and civic associations like (Woreda and Kebele women associations, youth associations at woreda and Kebele levels) the researcher had employed purposive sampling and particularly judgmental sampling technique. . So that to ensure effective community participation in local governance, political commitment the ruling party, capacity building practices both at woreda and kebele levels are recommended.

**Keywords:** Gulomekeda woreda, Decentralization, local governance, Kebele

## 1. Background of the Study

With the coming to an end of the Cold War period in Africa people became familiar and aware of citizenship rights and obligations. They were better educated and well informed about the existing socio-economic and political conditions of their states and become in need to participate in public affairs but were constrained by the existing structures of governance. Moreover, following the collapse of the communist model of development and the resulting disillusionment with authoritarian socialism, there emerged an African wave of re-thinking on the issue of development: what it entails and how it can be Promoted, sustained and consolidated in a land characterized by an amazing diversity of peoples.

This shift in or, better said, “Enhancement of”—African communitarianism was then articulated in the *Arusha Declaration*, which gives content to the reinforcing importance of decentralization and popular participation.

As a system of governance decentralized local governance , was to ensure that powers (political, decision-making, financial and managerial) are transferred from the centre to the local governments which would ensure that the people participate in the planning and decision making process such that they could identify themselves with developmental initiatives in their villages. In effect the theory is that popular participation would lead to effective and efficient service delivery, improved accountability and would reduce corruption and foster sustainable development in the country (Nsibambi 1998). There are also arguments which claim that where decentralized local governance is said to be accompanied by participation, empowerment, accountability and transparency its impact is likely to be positive for it reduces cost of service provision and transaction costs (Bertucci, 2005)

Even though, it was not in a modern and constitutionally guaranteed way Ethiopia had also experienced a decentralized system of government even before the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Zemelak (2008) as cited in (Tilahun, 2014; Zemelak, 2011) it was only from around 1855 that a plodding centralization of power was initiated in the country. However starting from 1991 again decentralization has been one of the fundamental features of Ethiopian political system (Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2008; Tilahun, 2014). As a result in the Ethiopian decentralization system, there are two generations of decentralization of power since 1991 (Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2008; Abrham, 2011; Tilahun, 2014). The first was decentralization of powers and functions of the state to autonomous regional governments (Tilahun, 2014).

While the second involves shifting the decision- making closer to the people at woreda level in a more comprehensive and concerted way to ensure socio-economic development under the program of District Level

Decentralization (Meskerem, 2007) and on which this research is focused on.

In line with the second level of decentralization, the regional have established lower administrative levels such as zones, woredas equivalence of districts and kebeles equivalence of sub-districts. Thus, woreda and kebele level administrative units are given special focus by every region's administration (MoFED, 2012) especially since 2001 of District Level Decentralization Program (DLDP) implementation. As a member of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the National Regional State of Tigray has also implemented the decentralization of power to lower units' of administration in order to ensure locally driven socio economic development. Therefore, this study is meant to assess the exercise of decentralized local governance process in the local district of Gulomekeda woreda in Tigray regional state, Ethiopia.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Description of the study area**

This study was carried out in the year 2016, in three randomly selected Kebeles of Gulomekeda district, Eastern zone of Tigray National Regional State, Ethiopia, which is found at about 915 km North of Addis-Ababa. According to the Statistical Magazine of the woreda (2014) the total population of the Woreda is 102,726 of whom 49,171 were male and 53, 115 were female. Among the total population 14,559 are urban dwellers.

### **2.2. Sample and sampling procedure**

The study was carried out by purposively selecting three Kebeles out of a total of nineteen Kebeles. To select concerned interview participants and group discussants from each Kebele and woreda officials the researcher had employed judgmental sampling technique.

### **2.3. Type, source and method of data collection**

To deal effectively with the research problem primary data were collected about the state of the exercise of decentralized local governance in the woreda. The data were basically qualitative in nature. The Primary data were gathered from a total of 20 interview participants (woreda and kebele officials, civic association members (including with members of woreda teacher and women association, woreda and Kebele Youth association) using structured interview and from two focus group discussions.

### **2.4. Data Analysis**

To analyze the qualitative data obtained through interviews and focus group discussions the researcher was used a kind of narration.

## **3. Statement of the Problem**

There is a premise that local governance is an important driver of a country's overall progress and towards achieving local socio-economic development (FDRE&UNDP, 2012). That is why the Ethiopian government has adopted a federal governance architecture that recognizes the constitutive power of the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia. Responsibility and authority over development management are shared between federal government, regional states and local government entities thereby ensuring that people own and take control of their development trajectory. Such shared powers range from development planning to taxation and mechanisms to ensure and protect shared responsibilities, including fiscal equalization or grant sharing formulas (National Human Development Report, 2014).

Unfortunately, the experience from local governance practices shows that the exercise of the local governance process in most countries and especially less developing countries like Ethiopia lacks the basics of local governance process like community participation in governance, ownership of projects, policies and strategies, the principles of accountability and transparency as well as empowerment. As a consequence different communities are still living in poverty in Ethiopia and for which the local governance process is facing difficulties and unable to deal (MoFED, 2012). Shumete (2009) also strengthens the idea claiming that "due to several reasons that local governance actors face in bringing socio-economic development poverty in particular and poor local socioeconomic development and governance, in general is, the reality in Ethiopia today" and of which the largest section socioeconomically poor is rural people with insufficient assets to produce and purchase food.

## **4. Discussion and Results**

### **4.1. Local Governance, Essence of Community Participation and Empowerment in the local District**

Many countries struggling to achieve democracy are inevitably and always challenge with a primary question: how to encourage constructive public participation in government decisions, particularly at the local level. Governments need such public input, for example, to make sure that resources are employed where they are most wanted and needed, services are distributed equitably, and funds collected in the form of taxes and fees are

properly accounted for. As a response they decentralized their political landscape to allow local governments with decision making power. There are arguments that squabble where decentralized local governance is said to be accompanied by participation, empowerment, accountability and transparency its impact is likely to be positive for it reduces cost of service provision and transaction costs (Bertucci, 2005). This is because effective local governance through decentralization invariably means that there is devolution of power and that participation, empowerment and accountability of communities is a measure on how successful the process has been. Bertucci, (2005) have correctly captured the idea that

*“participation and empowerment will sound hollow if illiteracy rates are high, with an added bias against women, if the macro stance implies usurious rates of interest that the poor cannot access and if communities and civil society organizations cannot provide alternatives in the absence of markets”.*

World Bank (2002) on the other hand explains empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities of communities to participate and negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. This indicator would give a full notion for the essence of local governance process and its impossibility seeing it in separation from what is called community empowerment. Besides to this shows that communities should/ would have power and should be able to influence the actions and decisions of the local government in view of the fact that it matters their live too and they need to have power, information, decision making place and economic power. In other words participation and empowerment of community to prevail it is only with the possession of legal and economic power and opportunity to participate in the local governance process.

Asked about “how the exercise of the local governance in ensuring opportunities for people to participate in decision making in the woreda is” respondents feel confused and confirmed that they are participating on different issues through different associations and representatives but also question that the meaning and effect of the physical availability and power of their representatives in decision making. One of the interviewees from the woreda administration comments the following for the essence of participation in Gulomekeda woreda:

*“...In this regard since government decisions will affect the lives of communities it is widely believed and practiced that stakeholders are participating in kebele, and woreda administration councils, and are participating directly and indirectly on different local matters. And this can be considered as a natural fact that can show the outcome and commitment of the local governance for all stakeholders to deal about different social and economic issues in the woreda”.*

In addition to the above idea one interviewee from woreda women association also reported that it is due to the essence of decentralized local governance that women get representation and participation in the woreda and local council however if they are really empowered remains questionable . In her words:

*“.....Women are represented and participate in different levels through different associations like women association, women affairs and are in different political positions for example. They are also participating in income generating activities, schooling and others. Therefore, this can be considered as one important feature of localized governance in our woreda, however to what extent women explain themselves and are accepted will be the question and in this regard the woreda is too late”*

Contrary to this other respondent have reported that “though there is participation however it is better to ask what kind of participation is it”. According to the interview respondent “yes civic associations participate like parent –teachers association, farmers association, women association, youth association, teacher association and community representatives from different kebeles in the woreda council however beyond attending the meeting they have no real power in practice to decide on educational and agricultural matters and to speak frankly it is because they all are less empowered to do so. In short the kind of participation in local district is a kind of unincensitised participation. What I mean by unincensitised participation in this context is about the local leaders and officials are not ready to take the views, opinions and policy alternatives of the local people. Simply symbolic participation is allowed, sharp and real critique has been placed out of the reach of the representatives and the people.

Concerning to the empowerment and role of the people in influencing the local governance of the local governance the focus group discussants have reported that it is not possible even to provide simple local solution against what is commanded from the woreda even though unfit with the demands of the local people. Putting the narratives in their words:

*“We sometimes face a serious problem to decide on different issues especially regarding to fertilizer provision and sale. Most of the time the power is in the woreda and the woreda orders us that all farmers have to buy at the size determined above. However most farmers are not interested with and, we (administrators) are also not interested too. Because the decision of the above body for the so called amount of fertilizer did not consider in to account the interest of*

*farmers, the size of the land, rainfall issues and traditional fertilizer and the mode of payment. Then we got in to clash with the public and generally the people are not heard by the administration”*

Besides these interview respondents have clearly declared that communities in the woreda are encouraged to participate through different associations, leagues like women’s league, youth league, farmers association and different development networks but their participation is not to initiate and decide on local policies or matters that affect their life rather it is to implement what is declared by the ruling party and are constrained with the ruling party’s interest than the people. This notion shows a very interesting fact that civic association and local representatives in the local district are watch dogs of the ruling party since they cannot initiate policy initiatives and proposals as well as they cannot identify themselves as the real representatives of their members and the local people. This is quiet similar with what Yilmaz and Venugopal (2008) have stated “the separation of the executive and legislative is blurred and all local government employees are beholden to the party administration including the executives”. Mahari (2007) supports this finding arguing that the father of the constitution—EPRDF itself through its organizational culture of democratic centralism and centralized party structure, has weakened devolution of power in Ethiopia. He further adds “the political constitution of EPRDF effectively antagonizes the district level decentralization it has built, since democratic centralism is an antithesis of decentralization and local governance”. He further states “unless mechanisms for ensuring accountability of performance are designed the process of political and economic decentralization will get challenged. This is because as Olowu, (2000a) correctly captured Local Governments are instruments of economic and social development. This is because of participation in development has often been located in development projects and programmes, as a means of strengthening their relevance, quality and sustainability Gaventa and Valderrama (1999), and stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them (World Bank, 1995).

From this one can conceive that community capacity to participate in planning and decision making in the woreda is limited and their interests are muted. This may reflect skepticism at the process; however greater enthusiasm was witnessed in relation to certain participatory pilot exercises. For example communities are allowed to take part in contributing money, material or labor in the meetings held at different levels however to exercise their choice and voice is very limited in the woreda. Tegene (2007) (cited in Adonay, 2011) explains “people’s participation at local level administration in Ethiopia was limited to material contribution, which was far from the true essence of empowering the local people”. The finding by Tegegne and Kassahun (2004) also revealed this that participation is manifested at local governments however with no more than in the form of simple consultation which cannot qualify as a good approach for ensuring citizen voice. Based on the discussions he made on popular participation in decentralized governance in Mekelle city and particularly Adi-Haki sub city Adonay (2011) also underlines that, “the level of empowerment of the local people through decentralized local governance is not as expected”. The World Bank (2001) report on Ethiopian woreda study as well explains in Ethiopian woredas residents remain largely passive beneficiaries of public service delivery rather than active participants in its management. Yilmaz and Venugopal (2008) also asserted in line with this finding that:

*“..... Women have reserved seats in woreda and kebele council but they lack voice when it comes to local planning and decision making. While the kebele assemblies and mass association should act as mechanisms of social accountability in the current political system they seem to function mostly as arms of central control at the local level”.*

In line with this finding Uemura, (1999) clarifies that as participation can range from passive involvement that can’t go beyond mere use of resources, contribution of materials, involvement in attendance and consultations to active participation like participation in delivery of service and participation in real decision making activities that is what empowerment is and this missing in the woreda.

#### **4.2. Accountability and Transparency of the Local Governance: What the Local People Say?**

On the other side asked about whether the exercise of the local governance is accountable for action and transparent the interview respondents confirmed that they don’t think that the local governance is accountable and transparent in the woreda. “Accountability of local governance institutions and officials are not to the public rather to the political wing and to the higher bodies in most cases” said the respondents. According to them most employees for example are not available in offices while they are in the town and if a service user comes in need of them different reasons flow including they are in meeting, tea room and so on. This would result in to serious corrupt behavior and unresponsiveness as what Ramesh et al (2013), Unaccountable governance is not transparent and the subsequent result is corrupt leadership and political landscape.

However since they feed their superiors with plenty of cooked data and are loyal to them no one will raise any question. Viewing this from the very essence of decentralized local governance point of view remaining accountable to the ruling party is against the principle of the process of local democratization.



However the motive for local governance heavily relies on increasing local transparency and accountability of institutions. In general terms lack of accountability conflict of interest and nepotism; the unacceptable amount of time it takes to issue administrative orders, certificates, and licenses are common realities in the woreda said the respondents.

Different empirical studies have also confirmed that due to the dual role (executive and legislators at the same time) that councilors' assume at different level in the country they always focus on keeping and hiding the mistakes of the ruling party and struggle to help it sustain in power and finally public accountability missed. Yilmaz and Venugopal (2008) supports this claiming that in Ethiopia councilors occupy dual roles as full time executive functionaries depending on and accountable to higher bureaucracies as well as elected local officials'. This creates a conflict of interest and undermines the councilors ability to oversee the executive.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1. Conclusion

In summary, if we are to follow evidences from the theoretical findings in line with the local level evidences from key informants and interviewees at Kebele and woreda level the researcher derived three findings/ points concerning to the exercise of the local governance.

Firstly, the exercise of the decentralized local governance in Gulomekeda woreda provides opportunities for participation in mass mobilizations, money and labor contributions as well as mere representation with insignificant decision making power. They further, mentioned several constraints for ensuring citizen voice such as: "heavy reliance on traditional mode of representation through elected council members, and by resorting to mass mobilization and mass consultation".

Secondly, decentralized local governance in the woreda is not convincing in empowering actors, like women, civic associations, representatives, kebele administrators to influence the local governance process in the district. This is so according to most of the respondents since every activity is seen from the party discipline and democratic centralism and it is against the very essence of local governance which is believed to ensure choice and voice for local people."

Thirdly, due to lack of investments for empowerment of actors and hence developing the capacity to influence the local governance process accountability and transparency of public officials is at worrying point in the local district.

### 5.2. Recommendations

The following points can be considered as solutions prescribed to deal with the problems of the local governance process in the local district of Gulomekeda Woreda.

- *Political commitment and the desire to be free from the dogma of political centralization is one step for improving the local governance process since democratic decentralization highly controls ideas and alternatives. This is because of the reason that effective and democratic local governance highly depends up on viable community participation in governance, project management, ownership and community empowerment to ask what ever unclear without any fear.*
- *Capacity building practices both at woreda and kebele levels can also be seen as a crucial point in reference to the local district. Members of the local parliament, civic associations, and the local people need to be aware of the basic essence and assumptions of local governance. This can be done through capacity building practices in meetings, short trainings, regular meetings of local parliamentary members, campaigns and so on.*
- *Institutionalizing merit based criteria for filling up government office positions than political loyalty and consequently ensures accountability and transparency.*

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