



International Journal of Social Sciences and Management

A Rapid Publishing Journal

ISSN 2091-2986



Indexing and Abstracting

CrossRef, Google Scholar, International Society of Universal Research in Sciences (EyeSource), Journal TOCs, New Jour, Scientific Indexing Services, InfoBase Index, Open Academic Journals Index (OAJI), Scholarsteer, Jour Informatics, Directory of Research Journals Indexing (DRJI), International Society for Research Activity (ISRA): Journal Impact Factor (JIF), Simon Fraser University Library, etc.

Vol- 3(1), January 2016



Impact factor*: 3.389

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Research Article

DECENTRALIZATION AND TOWN DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF SELECTED METEKEL ZONE TOWNS IN BENSANGUL GUMUZ REGIONAL STATE

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Abstract

Decentralized governance offers opportunities for achieving development through good governance and community participation at grass root (Ayenew, 2007). Thus, this study examines the contribution of decentralization for town development and; the opportunities and challenges of wereda decentralization for town development. The study was conducted in two selected Wereda capital towns in Metekel zone, Bulen and GilgelBeles. Data were collected from primary sources with the help of questionnaires, interviews and observation. The primary data were also supported by secondary documents such as federal and regional constitutions, proclamations, regulations, local development plans, official performance reports, and magazines. The data was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The study revealed that wereda level decentralization actually has influenced development at grass root level in Metekel zone in general, and towns in particular. Better infrastructural provisions (education and health) were witnessed in the towns. This is due to better community participation in decision making process and availability of opportunity to express their interest. Though, more is expected, the financial capacity of towns has also registered progress. However, the situation in urban land delivery does not show an improvement. Partiality, bias, and unaccountability are major hindrances in urban land delivery. The top down hierarchy between town administrations and wereda administrators has become a major challenge for a full exploitation of town resource and administration. Besides, shortage of qualified manpower and weak community participation in development activities were also other factors that have impacted the further performance of towns.

Key words: Decentralization, wereda/District, Town and Development

The Back Ground and the Rational of the Study

Decentralization is particularly widespread in countries of the world for variety of reasons: The advent of multiparty political systems in Africa; the deepening of democratization in Latin America; the transition from a command to a market economy in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; the need to improve delivery of local services to large populations in the centralized countries of East Asia. The challenge of ethnic and geographic diversity in South Asia, as well as ethnic tensions in other countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Russia is another reason for wide spread of decentralization in the world (Litvack *et al.*, 1998). Money scholars also suggest that whatever its origins, decentralization can have significant repercussions for resource mobilization and allocation, and ultimately macroeconomic stability, service delivery, and equity within countries.

Decentralization in our country has only two decades of age. Until 1991, Ethiopia was mainly characterized by centralization of power though there were some efforts at institutionalizing some form of decentralization. Under the Imperial Government, the country had been characterized by a centralized political-administrative system. In the era

of the *Derg*, despite the regime's support for self-government and local autonomy, the system did not take any meaningful measure to institute a devolved system of governance (Kanea, 2006).

The 1991 government change in Ethiopia has ushered in a decentralized system of governance. This is a departure from the past political system which did not allow for self-rule and institutional development and harmony between different ethnic groups (Gebre-Egziabher, 2007).

It is believed that, wereda level decentralization has a far reaching impact on different aspect of development. Urban development is one area that is significantly affected by decentralization. For example in Benshangul Gumuz regional state the past political system (centralism) has limited the development of towns. This can be expressed in terms of absence of infrastructural provisions (education, health, clean water supply, roads and so on). As a result, towns were rarely seen in the region. Since decentralization however significant numbers of towns have emerged as center of service provision.

Small towns are crucial catalysts of development particularly, for developing countries like Ethiopia. As noted by (Rondinelli, 1983), towns and small cities become essential nodes of trade and commerce in a larger network

of market centers that provide more diversified and higher order goods and services. Beyond this, they serve as the links in the system of distribution and exchange between agricultural areas and urban centers. Thus, for achieving of development, empowering of town is crucial.

The notion of empowering of towns in enhancing development in Ethiopia has strong relation with the decentralization program being implemented in the country. The process of decentralization in Ethiopia to the lower levels of government so far has passed through two stages; the first stage is the devolution of power to the regional states with substantial legislative, executive and judicial powers while the second stage is the decentralization of substantial authority to wereda administration, which is the lower level of government (Kanea, 2006). In light of the above argument Tegegen (2007) noted that, the motive force for this was Zonal and Regional authorities had a controlling, checking and monitoring power over the activities of Wereda governments. These circumstances prompted the central government to take an initiative to further devolve powers and responsibilities to the weredas in 2001 (Gebre-Egziabher, 2007). This implies that, at the second phase of decentralization weredas have been given power and responsibility for self-administration.

This was aimed through empowerment of the communities at grass root level and by creating close interaction between the local administrative units and the people through direct participation of people in the administrative affairs of local governments (Kanea, 2006). In the extended program of wereda decentralization, the major initiative was to devolve decision making authority to wereda and transform them in to strong institutions of local democratic governance and efficient means for delivering public services (Ayenew, 2007).

Accordingly, decentralized governance offers opportunities for achieving development through good governance and community participation at grass root level. It can support development by encouraging transparency and accountability, building of local participation in public decision making processes, empowering of communities and increasing their sense of belongingness.

For the achievement of this, wereda capital towns' role is crucial. Since 1991, the period when decentralization has ushered in Ethiopia, there are many newly emerging towns in different part of the country at various tiers such as regional, zonal and wereda capitals, and other town ships. It is not only the number that has been increasing, but also their socio-political and economic functions and roles they play.

In spite of their great role in implementation of decentralization program in the country, towns remained dependent on weredas administratively, politically and fiscally. Particularly, all existing towns, except the capital of the region, in Benshangul Gumuz regional State are

dependent on weredas. And this is not exception for towns in Metekel zone.

In practical, wereda decentralization has created favorable condition for town development in the weredas. It has provided opportunity for town development such as increased decision making authority, community participation, financial capacity etc. however, the effect to which these have been in place and what their influence is on town development are not clearly known. Of the same time wereda decentralization may pose a challenge to town development as towns continue to depend on town administration.

Therefore, the study will contribute some to the existing gap by making discussion in line with the following objectives: To identify manifestation of decentralization in towns: To assess the contribution of decentralization for town development particularly in key area such as financial capacity, selected infrastructural provision and, land and housing development: To assess the opportunities and challenges of wereda decentralization for town development.

Methodology

The selection of towns was based on the socio-economic performance and the time of their establishment (before and after decentralization). Consequently, two towns namely GilgelBeles and Bulen had been selected purposely as the sample for the study. GilgelBeles was established after the inception of decentralization in the country. It is serving as the capital of the zone and Mandurawereda. Because of this status (the zone and the wereda capital), there is especial attention to the town which enables it to offer better administrative functions. The town of Bulen is among those towns which were established before the decentralization. In comparison to the rest towns in the zone, it has better performances.

The studied population from the sample towns had included the weredas administrative office heads, the zonal work and urban development office head, municipals, public sector office heads (education, health, and water, financial and economic office and wereda capacity building). Besides, low administrative units (kebele administrators) were also the part of the sample. In addition to these, employees from education, health, water and municipal sector, and knowledgeable local elders from each kebeles of the towns had been included. So, this is believed to be representative because it had been taken from different segment of the population of sample towns.

Both primary and secondary data were employed for the purpose of this study. The primary data was obtained through interviewing local elders, service experts, kebele administrators and wereda political appointees.

The local elders that had been selected for interview were those who usually used to participation in local affairs and recognized by community members. The selection was

made by use of key informants. The service experts with whom interview had been made were those who had minimum of two years of work experience in their respective sector offices (health, education, and water). With regard to the political appointees, Metekelzone work and urban development head, wereda administrators, heads of wereda education and capacity building, health, and finance and economy, water board and town municipal had been interviewed. Furthermore, the town kebeles' administrators had been also interviewed. In addition to these, self-administered questionnaires were filled by education, health, water board, finance and economy, and municipal sector office employees to support other sources. Whereas secondary data had been obtained from the published and unpublished materials such as federal and regional constitutions, proclamations, regulations, local development plans, official performance reports, and magazines.

Major Finding

It is not questionable that wereda level decentralization actually has influenced the development of towns at grass root level in BenshangulGumuz regional State. The three aspects of decentralizations; political, administrative, and fiscal has become significantly affected.

In the wereda level decentralizing, towns are one area that has been significantly affected by decentralization. The effect has begun by restructuring town administration system, which in return has impacted community participation and infrastructural development. The establishment of town administration (municipals) and designating of power and responsibilities can be taken as administrative restructuring. This institutional adjustment has become causative agent for better public participation and infrastructural development. In infrastructural development (education, health and water supply) of towns, prominent changes have been seen. The educational service both in terms of public participation in decision making and accessibility was very limited before decentralization. But, at present the effect of decentralization on this sector is very strong. Similarly, health service accessibility has improved. The expanding health institutions and the service they offer are additional benefits. Nevertheless, according to the results of the study, water supply remained underdeveloped. The sector is affected by the prolonged institutional hierarchy, particularly in Bulen town.

Among very important town development elements, land and housing is the prominent one. The study showed that the enactment of some changes that had legal foundation. Among positive effects, full autonomy to allot urban land by town administrations can be mentioned. Consequently, there is faster rate of urban land allotment and house

constructions. In spite of this autonomy, miss use of power which is reflected in terms of lack of transparency and accountability in urban land planning and delivery is widely spread. Publicly offered authority has become good incidence for some individuals to accumulate wealth through illegal land trading.

The constraints that hampered the towns' efficient delivery of services and practice of fair urban land delivery are mainly the end product of dependency of town administration on weredas. This dependability has resulted in the town administrators' lack of confidence and power to administer. Theoretically, town administration has autonomy to communicate and mobilize urban community for participations. But the existing institutional hierarchy does not allow doing so. That is why weak relationship between municipals and residents has been created.

Recommendations

Thus, it is recommended that strengthening man power; creating mechanisms for better community participation; towns shall be independent of weredas administratively; caution has to be given to land delivery and house constructions; conducting further research principally on urban good governance practice could minimize the reflected problems.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my deepest gratitude goes to my advisor Professor Tegegne Gebre-Egziabher for his genuine and polite assistance, advice, and encouragement, which made the completion of this study possible. Admittedly, his dedicated professional assistance has helped me to complete the work within the specified time. My deepest gratitude and appreciation also goes to Gilgel Beless College Dean, Ato Debaba Amanu , Shewa Basiso, Tesfaye Gebeyehu and to all my colleagues who have been helping me professionally, materially and morally throughout my study.

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