

Devolution of Power and Woreda¹ or District Development in Benshangul Gumuz Regional State: The Case of Metkel Zone (North West Ethiopia)

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Abstract

Decentralized governance offers opportunities for achieving development through good governance and community participation at the grass root level (Ayenew, 2007). Ethiopia has adopted two phases of decentralization, namely decentralizing of power from the federal government to the regional level and from the regional to the woreda level (Gebre-Egziabher & Berhanu, 2007). Thus, this study has aimed at assessing the effect of the woreda level decentralization on the development of the Metekel zone. In particular, it examines the nature of political, administrative and fiscal decentralization in woredas. The study was conducted in two selected woreda, Bulen and Mandura. Data were collected from primary sources with the help of questionnaires, interviews and observations. 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 study revealed that woreda level decentralization actually has influenced development at the grass root level in the Metekel zone in general. Better infrastructural provisions (education and health) were witnessed in the woredas. This is due to better community participation in the decision-making process and availability of opportunities to express their interest. Though, more is expected, the financial capacity of woredas has also registered progress. The shortage of qualified manpower and weak community participation in development activities were other factors that have impacted the further performance of woredas.

Keywords: devolution, woreda, development.

Introduction

Various authors commonly classify decentralization into three categories; namely, administrative, political and fiscal decentralization. Administrative decentralization comprises the set of policies that transfers the administration and delivery of social services such as education, health, social welfare, or housing to sub-national governments (Falleti, 2006). The political decentralization normally refers to situations where political power and authority have been partially transferred to elect and empower sub-national levels of government ranging from village councils to state level bodies. It is a top-down process, which aims to give citizens or their elected

¹ Woredas are third-level administrative divisions in Ethiopia.

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representatives more power in public decision-making (Binder et al., 2007). The third category is fiscal decentralization. It entails the authority raising revenues or accessing transfers and making decisions on current investment expenditures (Gebre-Egziabher & Berhanu, 2007).

Financial decentralization is expected to facilitate access to resources by the local governments. It involves devolving budgetary and spending powers to districts (Muriisa, 2008). The process of decentralization in Ethiopia to the lower levels of government has so far 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 the woreda administration, which is the lower level of government (Tucho, 2006). In light of the above argument, Gebre-Egziabher and Berhanu (2007) noted that the motivational force for this was so zonal and regional authorities had a controlling, checking and monitoring power over the activities of woreda governments. These circumstances prompted the central government to take an initiative to further devolve powers and responsibilities to the woredas in 2001 (Gebre-Egziabher & Berhanu, 2007). This implies that at the second phase of decentralization, woredas have been given the opportunity and responsibility for self-administration.

According to Ayenew, (2007), the major initiative for the devolution of power to the woreda was to delegate decision making authority to the woreda and transform them into stronger institutions of local democratic governance and creating an efficient means for delivering public services. Accordingly, devolution of power offers opportunities for achieving development through good governance and community participation at the grass root level. It can support development by encouraging transparency and accountability, building local participation in public decision-making processes, empowering communities, and increasing their sense of belongingness. In spite of this opportunity, the nature of the practice of political, administrative and fiscal decentralization and its impact on development of woredas is under investigation.

The Specific Objectives

In short, the specific objectives of this research is:

- To identify the nature of political power devolution to the woreda in the Metekel Zone;
- To assess the environment of administrative and fiscal autonomy of power devolution in the Zone; and
- To examine the effect of the devolution of power on the woreda development.

Methodology

The selection of woredas was based on socio-economic performance. Consequently, two towns namely Mandura and Bulen had been selected purposely as the sample for the study. Mandura Woreda, with the capital of GilgelBeles, is serving as the capital of the Metekel Zone. Because of this status (the zone and the woreda capital), there is special attention to the woreda which enables it to offer better administrative functions. In comparison to the rest of woredas, Bulen Woreda is in the zone and has demonstrated better performance.

The studied population from the sample woredas included the woreda's administrative office heads, the zonal work and urban development office head, municipals, public sector office heads (education, health, water, financial and economic office, and woreda capacity building). In addition, low administrative units (kebele administrators) were also the part of the sample. Add to these employees from the education, health, water and municipal sector, and knowledgeable local elders from each kebele that had been included because they are principal bodies practicing the devolved power. Therefore, these are believed to be representative because they have been taken from different segments of the population.

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 woreda political appointees. The local elders that had been selected for interview were those who usually participated in local affairs and were recognized by community members. Of these, 14 elders from the two sample woredas were interviewed. The selection was made using key informants. From experts, group 6 samples were taken into consideration. In regard to the political appointees, the Metekel Zone Ministry of Work and Urban Development head, woreda administrators, heads of woreda education and capacity building, health and finance and economy, water board and town municipal were interviewed. From the two woredas, 13 informants were taken into account. Furthermore, the woreda kebeles' administrators were also interviewed, which numbered four.

In addition to the interviews, self-administered questionnaires were completed by education, health, water board, finance and economy, and municipal sector office employees to support other sources. From this part of sample population, 30 respondents were selected. The secondary data was obtained from published and unpublished materials such as the federal and regional constitutions, proclamations, regulations, local development plans, official performance reports, and magazines.

Major Finding

Political Representation

Based on power given by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Benshangul Gumuz Regional State has devolved power to woredas. Consequently, woredas are being led by woreda councils. As confirmed in the revised regional constitution article 86, the representatives are appointed through periodic elections. It states that "...They shall be elected directly by the people residing in kebeles within the woredas and are accountable to the people who elected them." Thus, it is possible to say that there is written legal foundation for self-governance of woredas in the region.

The Metekel Zone is among the three zones of the region that has obtained this right. From the interview of officials (woreda political representatives), it has been found that one indication of political decentralization in the zone is the representation of different ethnic groups. This is supported by the argument of Muriisa (2008) that decentralization allows for greater representation for ethnic groups in development policy, decision making, and implementation. In the case of the

Bulen woreda, the existing ethnic groups can be categorized into three: namely Shinasha, Gumuz and others (Amhara, Oromo and Agew). Of these, the first two groups are indigenous. As a result, the political power is shared between the Shinasha and Gumuz people. The Shinasha possess the woreda administration council whereas the woreda council (legislative body) is constituted by the Gumuz. But in the case of the Mandura Woreda, the situation is a little bit different. The ethnic constituency is similar with that of the Bulen Woreda, but here Gumuz are the largest in number. Unlike the Bulen, all the woreda seats (executive and legislative) are occupied by the Gumuz people.

Even though the existence of self-governance is reflected, a defect is being observed on the other side. The defect is the uni-ethnic group representation in the case of the Mandura Woreda, and the total absence of other non-indigenous groups from the woreda administrations in both cases. The political representation is therefore not in line with that of the ethnic composition of the region.

At the regional level, all ethnic groups residing in the region are fairly represented. Of the 99 regional council seats, 39.6 % are occupied by Berta (25.90% of the total population of the region), 34.56% by Gumuz (21.11% of the total population), 10.89% by Shinasha (7.59% of total population), 3.96% by Mao-Komo people (2.86% of the total population), and 10.89% by other non-indigenous groups (42% of the total population). So at the regional level, power sharing reflects ethnic diversity, whereas in the study area, the absence of the other ethnic groups as political appointees is one of the weak side that needs improvement.

In addition to what has been pointed out earlier, limited educational background of some appointees is another challenge. According to many respondent views from the two woredas, weak educational background has created a lack of understanding among each other. Moreover, the woredas' ability to prepare detailed directives is in general at a low level though power is legally vested to the woredas. However, according to woreda political appointees, there are some beginnings towards formulating detailed regulations and directives.

Administrative Aspect

Administrative decentralization has influence on the service delivery system. The organizational structure of certain communities has a great influence on the way service is being delivered to citizens in any nation. So, it is crucial to see the organizational structure first.

The decentralized organizational sector structure in Figure 1 reflects the existence of the decentralized administration within woredas in comparison to the period before decentralization. The administrative structure before decentralization was not detailed as is revealed in Figure 2.

The decentralized administration could be one of the reasons for the expansion service delivery in the woredas. The following illustrates the provision of services before and after the ushering of decentralization to the woredas.

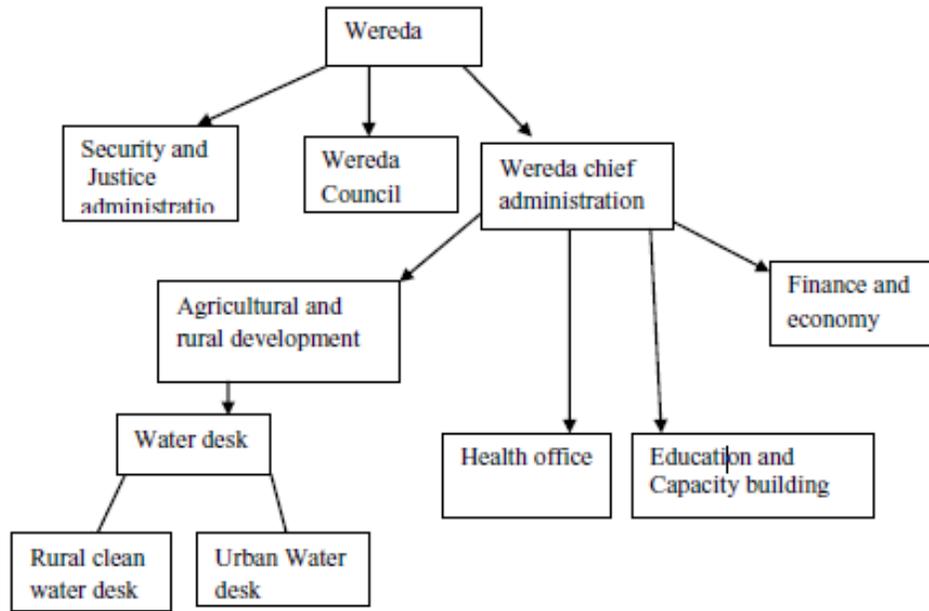
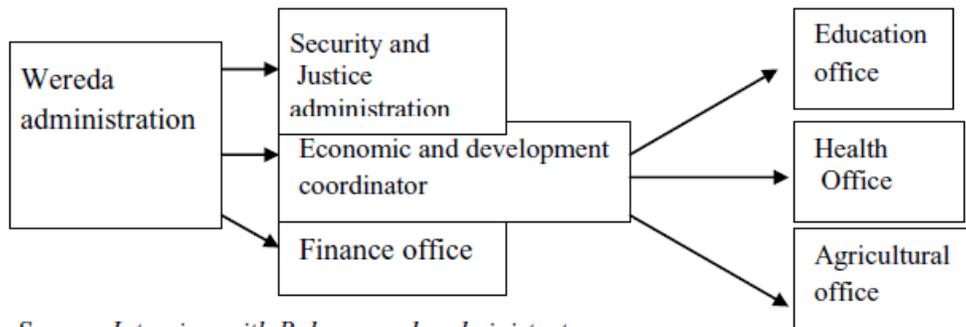


Figure 1: The institutional structure of woredas after woreda decentralization



Source; Interview with Bulen woreda administrator

Figure 2: The institutional structure of woredas before decentralization

Table 1 reveals that community participation in the construction of schools in the woreda increased after woreda decentralization (2002). One of the interesting outcomes of decentralization is the expansion of Alternative Basic Education (ABE) schools that considers the socio-economic and cultural settings of the local community. The source of construction materials and man power is from the local community. Teachers are also from the community and they can speak local languages. Generally, Figures 1, 2, and Table 1 could imply that decentralization has enabled the expansion of educational services. As responded by woreda executives, this is due to the fact that the contribution of decentralization has created awareness and consciousness among communities through local governors.

Table 1

Number of Schools Constructed Before and After Decentralization in Bulen Woreda

	Level of class	location kebele	Year of its establishment	Built by
1	Primary (1-8)	Bulen 01	1958/1966	Government
2	Primary (1-6)	Baruda	1970/1978	Government
3	Primary(1-6)	Mora	1973/1981	Government
4	Primary(1-7)	Amange	1976/1984	Government
5	Primary (1-4)	Gongo	1977/1985	Government
6	High school (1-10)	Dobi	1978/1986	Government
7	Preparatory	Bulen 02	1987/1995	Government
8	Primary (1-6)	Apar	1998/1997	Government
9	Primary(1-8)	Mata	1992/2000	Government
10	Primary(1-6)	chelanko	1992/2000	Government
11	Primary (1-2)	Degedela	1998/2006	Government
12	ABE	Mojinb	1998/2006	Government
13	ABE	Sega	1998/2006	Community
14	ABE	Goja	1998/2006	Community
15	ABE	Dorejela	1998/2006	Community
16	ABE	Godararie	1998/2006	Community
17	ABE	Motish	1999/2007	Community
18	ABE	Gushagonjl	1999/2007	Community
19	ABE	Dukis	1999/2007	Community
20	ABE	Azem	1999/2007	Community
21	ABE	Tachmeti	1999/2007	Community
22	ABE	Atoki	1999/2007	Community
23	ABE	Adisalem	1999/2007	Community

ABE: Alternative Basic Education

Note: Many schools were upgraded after decentralization (2002) by the community

Source: Bulen Woreda educational and capacity building

The health service delivery situation shows similar changes due to the enactment of decentralization in the woredas. Based on discussions with community elders, there was only one clinic for the whole populations of woredas before decentralization. After decentralization, however, the service situation improved in both woredas studied. In the case of the Mandura Woreda, at present there are eight health service centers. This has increased the health coverage of the woreda to 75% and vaccinations coverage to 59 % in 2008 (BGPDPGLP report, 2009). Similarly, the clean water supply has grown from zero (before decentralization) to 58% in terms of coverage for the Mandura Woreda, and it is planned to increase the coverage to 98% in 2014 (BGPDPGLP report, 2009). It should however be noted that though clean water projects have increased, river water is the principal source of water in the woreda. Therefore, a caution is needed in understanding the water coverage data.

The participation of community in decentralized service delivery is the most important aspect of development. But, most of the time community interests are not directly assessed and identified in the sample woredas. Many officials and service experts have responded that the residents' ideas are usually reflected in the woreda plans via kebele administrators. It is kebele councils that gather information from communities and pass it to the woredas. It is in very rare cases that woreda sector offices consult or discuss with the communities directly on the quality and quantity of service being delivered. In principle, the woreda civil service offices have been established to hear the communities' interests and requests. Even though a legally established mechanism exists, the performance remains poor.

Consequently, communities indirectly use different occasions to express their dissatisfaction. These occasions are weekly kebele development dates when the woreda consults the kebeles for its own purpose and informally informs the concerned sectors. But, responses for informal ideas are weak.

Despite the existence of such hindrances, there is a strong side of the woreda in community participation. The kebele's ability to plan and include it in the woreda's plan is one strong side of participation. The kebele council prepares an annual plan in line with woreda sector offices (education, health, municipals, water, etc). The woreda sector offices then incorporate the plans in their respective plans before the woreda plan gets ratified by the woreda cabinet.

In connection to community involvement, it is very essential to recognize female, youth and elder contribution in the woreda development plan and its implementation. The data from field interviews revealed that significant change has been observed regarding females' participation. They play a role in the woreda plan through the office of female affairs. Formerly, this office had existed, but it is only recently that positive changes are noted. For example, the head of the female affairs office became a member of the woreda council after decentralization. This enabled the woreda to promote female participation in the preparation and implementation of plan. This in turn has influenced other service sectors such as education to give emphasis to female students. As a result, tutorial classes, guidance and counselling services, and financial support have been offered to females by education and capacity building offices and different NGOs.

Contrary to this, the interviews showed that youth participation is minimal. The woreda youth and sport office exists only nominally with unclear roles and responsibilities. It seems that the weakness has emerged from limited skills and capacity of the woreda to communicate with and mobilize youths.

From the discussions of infrastructural provisions and community participation, one can claim that the administrative decentralization in the Metekel Zone is a devolution type. There is authority and power to make decisions on local development issues with moderate community participation. However, there are still problems that need solutions. As stated by political representatives and civil service experts, these problems in the woredas can be summarized as follows:

1. Unnecessary interference from zone or regional government. This involves enforcing woredas to accept new employees without the interest of the woreda. Mostly, the

enforcements are in informal ways through phone calls or orally. The interferences also are manifested in the delaying of the rights (benefits) of employees which is the main cause for staff turnover of experienced personals in the woredas;

2. Limited capacity in understanding and interpreting rules and regulations. As a result, there is a mixing of activities between the woreda councils and woreda administration councils; and
3. Failure of some executives (heads) to participate on weekly or monthly meetings (particularly in the Mandura Woreda).

Nature of Fiscal Autonomy

Political and administrative decentralization without fiscal autonomy is nominal. This is stated by Falleti (2005) as “There is no decentralization without fiscal decentralization. This is because one cannot use administrative and political authority or power unless one is fiscally empowered.” So, it is important to understand the nature of financial authority in the zone. Information from interviews with woreda executives shows that within the realm of fiscal decentralization, significant changes have been observed, and it can be summarized as: increments of the woreda’s ability to identify resource sources and use them, freedom of woredas to run finance for the purposes they intend, and the enhancement of woreda capacity to contact Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to get significant support.

The interviews revealed that the source and the extent of financial collection have been improved. Most of the sources are block budgets, agricultural taxes, income taxes, penalties, taxes from natural resources such as marble and gold (in Bulen), taxes on the exporting of cereal and cash crops, and taxes on importing of manufactured goods. In addition, the private investors’ role is also significant. The direct tax from land being used by investors and income tax from their employees are principal sources of the woredas’ income. However, beyond taxes, the advantage of natural resource exploitation by investors within a town is not visible. A woreda’s autonomy to communicate with NGOs has enabled them to gain multi-side support. The support of NGOs is mostly in the form of social services such as building schools, health centers, clinics, and clean water supply, which indirectly save the expenditures of woredas. However, the support focuses on the respective interests of the NGOs.

The manifestation of authority over block grant budgets can be expressed as being like the federal government where the regional government allocates a budget among the woredas that is based on the woreda’s capacity to generate revenue and on the population. In turn, the woredas have started to allocate a budget to their respective sub-sectors related to education, health and the clean water supply. The respective sectors again subdivide the budget among themselves.

The most remarkable freedom in a woreda’s fiscal autonomy is the use of excess revenue within respective areas of administration. There is a standard for each budget year that specifies what woredas are expected to collect. In case woredas are able to collect revenues beyond what is expected from them (excess revenue), they can use the revenue under the approval of the woreda council. But this must be acknowledged by the regional government.

Despite the autonomy and the financial increment, the financial operation system of the Bulen and Mandura Woredas is not free from problems. In most cases, the constraints are not caused by decentralization. Rather, they are due to implemental issues. According to service sector heads responses, the major problems in relation to finance in both woredas involve:

1. A high gap created between what is proposed and what is allocated: The gap is due to a low-income base and small population, which are the main criteria in budget allocation. The consequence of this problem has been that the woreda sector offices were forced to revise their plans. Usually the revised plans involve reducing the number of employees from what is intended to hire for the fiscal year;
2. The selfish desire among sectors. This includes top executive bodies of woredas. All sector heads prioritize their sector to get a greater budget proportion. Such conflicting interest is usually solved by the cabinet. However, the cabinet is not free from the problem. For example, under the guise of vehicle maintenance, higher budgets are allotted to the woreda and administration councils. This has influenced the performance of governmental development activities like education and health service directly or indirectly. For example, the financial shortage in the health sector may result in an expansion of disease which can influence the members of education (teachers, students, experts, etc);
3. There is also a tendency of using sections of the budget for other purposes regardless of for what it has been proposed (budget wastage). Through excessive field works, officials waste much of the budget. This has a direct repercussion on budget availability. Moreover, in some sectors, usage of the allocated budget is unplanned, which is always followed by a deficit of finances at the middle of the budget year; and
4. Another finance related problem is a minimum or absence of direct participation of community members in budget planning and processing. It is mostly only sector office heads who prepare plans. A community's opportunity to know about the woreda budget is when it is posted on the board after being ratified by the council. The absence of community participation may become a factor for loss of trust by the community.

Recommendations

One of the major problems identified regarding to the capacity of the woredas during the implementation of the decentralization program is the shortage of experienced and qualified manpower. This is the root cause for other problems in political, infrastructural, and financial administration in the zone. To reduce such problems, the existing system should be strengthened in terms of manpower that can understand and interpret rules and directives so that each woreda is able to mobilize the community for local development of activities.

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