

## DISTRICT LEVEL DECENTRALIZATION PROGRAM IN IROB WOREDA OF TIGRAY REGION: IMPLEMENTATION, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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### ABSTRACT

Decentralization entails the transfer of power, from central government to sub-national levels of government. As a result many supporters of the program including donors consider it as a mechanism of achieving a number of different aims. Although there are some research works that show local governments are facing challenges in practicing and instituting viable Woreda administrations with the requisite capacity for self-governance and local economic development, studies however, are not a full-fledged and not all comprehensive and common in perspective, considering the different perceptions about the program. Therefore, by employing a case study research strategy, this study attempted to assess the implementation of the District Level Decentralization Program (DLDP) in Irob Woreda, including the challenges and prospects. Findings generally showed that the DLDP is neither institutionalized nor governed by the principles of reciprocity. The inter-governmental relationship is particularistic and private, and anchored only loosely in public law or community norms. Besides local capacities, financial and administrative issues were found to be very limited in the area, and the lack of real political autonomy, finance and skilled man power were the major issues limiting the district' level decentralization process.

**Keywords:** Gulomekeda, Decentralization, District, Institution

### INTRODUCTION

Decentralization entails the transfer of power, responsibilities and finance from central government to sub-national levels of government at provincial and/or local levels (Crawford and Hartmann 2009). Derrese (2003:1) as cited in Abraham (2011) also defined decentralization as a process of transferring political power, administrative, and fiscal responsibilities from central government to lower levels of government. As a result many supporters of the program including donors consider it as a mechanism of achieving a number of different aims. This is because on the one hand, "citizen-regarding" governments and some donor organizations consider decentralization as a practical way to bring services to previously neglected peripheral areas, obtain a more equitable distribution of public services and increase popular participation in policy choices. At the other end, "self-regarding" central governments consider decentralization mostly as a way of reducing the burden of unpopular structural adjustment programs on national politicians by offloading service responsibilities to sub national governments (Brosio, 2000).

Nowadays, decentralization policy is becoming popular and prominent development strategy in most developing countries (Abraham, 2011). Though the pace of transformation is very uneven across countries, since the middle of the 1980s most African countries have started a transfer of power, resources and responsibilities to their sub national governments. Decentralization is one of the leading political reforms that developing countries have undertaken in the two decades since the end of the Cold war, and it has arguably been undertaken (at least in name) in more countries in Africa than anywhere else in the world (Dickovick and Wunsch, 2014). According to Wunsch (2014), in the past two decades, the majority of African central governments have initiated or deepened the transfer of power and resources to a range of sub national governments. This kind of policy practice can therefore considered as a key measure to deal with complex problems that African governments face from time to time including to ease the provision of social service and democratization while they were under the structural adjustment program. As a result of the underlying facts leading to market failure to provide public goods and services, there have been widespread attempts to redefine the potential role of the public sector and improve its performance to achieve the objectives





mentioned above. An important component of these reforms is the introduction of policies to decentralize government functions (Smoke, 2001 as cited in Abraham 2011).

Though was not formal and based on clear constitutional principles Ethiopia's experience of decentralized system of governance also traces back prior to the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Zemelak (2008) as cited in Tilahun (2014) and 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 and Venugopal, 2008; Tilahun, 2014). The new Transitional Government, led by the EPRDF publicly pledged its commitment to three radical reform objectives: namely the decentralization of the state, the democratization of politics, and the liberalization of the economy (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). EPRDF announced its determination to bring radical reform and to decentralize power within the Ethiopian state of which it had won control (Ibid). This was because the EPRDF concluded that the extreme centralization of state power, its 'ethnocratic' concentration in the hands of an elite from a single group, at the expense of the country's other impoverished, oppressed, and exploited populations, as the central root of Ethiopia's modern political history of war, famine, and underdevelopment.

As a result the Ethiopian decentralization process passes through two generations of decentralization of power (Yilmaz and 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). In line with the second level of decentralization, the regional governments 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 especially since 2001 of District Level Decentralization Program (DLDP) implementation (MoFED, 2012).

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 will use a case study research approach to bring together and examine a wide range of decentralization processes, its implementation as well as the challenges and opportunities across the local district of Irob by examining each of them according to a well-developed conceptual framework and pre-established set of criteria's.

However, concerning to DLDP there are some research works that show local governments are facing challenges in practicing and instituting viable Woreda administrations with the requisite capacity for self-government and local economic development. However these studies are not a full-fledged and not all comprehensive to show the practice of district level decentralization program. Now days it is common to hear different perceptions towards the program. On the one hand there are people who claim that the program is not successful. Mulugeta (2012) for instance stated that "evaluation reports, researches and the results on the ground hardly justify the successes of this (the DLDP) program. Conscious and voluntary participation of the communities at the grassroots level is not also as much as the desired outcome". On the other hand there are people with "not properly studied" position to speak about its impact. Meheret (2007) for instance argues the full impact of the government's Woreda decentralization program and the challenges faced in instituting democratic governance structures have not been properly assessed. Kassa (2015) on the other hand also explained the essence of DLDP saying "the though good initiative to introduce the program but one can criticize it as something without continuous research and evaluation to measure its contribution to democratic governance and local development in the Ethiopian case".

Besides, John-Mary Kauzya (2014) also argue that "insufficient insight is given into the study of the practice of decentralization, the challenges and prospects of local governments especially located in the periphery areas of the African continent". The rationale behind this argument according to Kauzya(2014) is that, local governments located in the peripheries could be similar in practicing local governance system, the challenges they face and the prospects they would have too. Taking



in to account all these contradictions and confusions the researcher wants to assess the essence of DLDP in the border district of Irob Woreda. Irob Woreda is one of the Woredas in the Tigray Regional State of Ethiopia and legally recognized under the DLDP program to deal with the socio economic affairs of the local people. It is also one of the Woredas located in the border of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Therefore, this study is designed to assess the implementation, challenges and prospects of district level decentralization program in Irob district. More specifically the research is intended to analyse the implementation of the local governance process and important aspects of inter-governmental relations in the local district, while also evaluating the local capacities (financial and administrative) of Irob Woreda and the essence of community participation in the planning and budgeting process in Irob district. Additionally, it set out to identify the major constraints and prospects related to the practical implementation of district level decentralization program (DLDP) in the Woreda. The research provided detailed explanation for questions like: 1.) How pragmatic and enabling is the local governance process to provide real opportunities of decision making and establishing inter-governmental relations among the lower levels of government? 2) How capable is the local district in financial and administrative capacities to provide socio-economic services effectively in the local district? 3) How do communities taking part and involving in the planning and budgeting process in Irob Woreda? And 4) what are the problems and prospects in the implementation of Woreda decentralization in the study area?

## METHODOLOGY

**Research Strategy and Design:** This qualitative study adopted the cross-sectional case study research design in line with the strategies explained by Johnson, *et al.* (2007).

**Target Population:** The focus of this study was on actors (local government officials, teachers, community members, Kebele administrators and students, development agents and civic association representatives and local council members) in the local governance of Irob Woreda.

**Sampling Technique:** The non-probability sampling technique was employed in this study. This is because purposive sampling is the more acceptable sampling procedure for qualitative research, particularly, when it involves selecting participant for special situation (Ishak and Abu Bakar, 2014).

**Sample Size:** Regarding to the size of the sample respondents the researcher is not strict and had considered data saturation point. Tuckey and Stewart (2004) for example, argued that there is no hard and fast rule to determine appropriate sample size in qualitative research. Flick (2009) (as cited in Ishak and Abu Bakar, 2014) also suggested that the individuals or cases are selected as participants for a qualitative study not because they represent their population but owing to their relevance to the research topic.

**Data Type and Source:** To achieve the objectives of the study, both primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data types had been collected respectively. The primary qualitative data was collected from woreda heads, different sector office heads at woreda and Kebele/*Tabia* level, woreda and Kebele council members through in-depth interview, interview with key informants, and focus group discussions.

**Data Collection:** The researcher conducted in depth and key informants interview, focus group discussions and some extent document analysis in the process of conducting this research.

**Data Analysis:** To analyze the qualitative research objectives description, theme analysis and assertions of information (thematic analysis) has been used. To achieve the maximum validity of the data the researchers had employed triangulation method.

## RESULTS/FINDINGS

Pertaining to the implementation and practice of district level decentralization program in Irob district among the major findings/problems of the research are the following:

### **Lack of institutionalization**

The researcher gives *focus* to the structures, work environment and human power strength to find out how the DLDP is institutionalized. As a result, the findings show that structures frequently changed without proper



evaluation, which in turn affects the stability and productivity of institutions. Elements of neo patrimonialism have been found in the local district. It seems political structure at lower levels of government has become personalized at the cost of institutionalization. As a result downward accountability remained ineffective. This applies to all Woredas of the region implementing the DLDP. One of the key informants of woreda officials argued that:

#### **Lack of operative decentralization, decision making power and resources**

*Decision making authority and resources the fundamental problem* is observed in Irob district which includes the inability to exhaustively utilize the resources and authority transferred to the district. As a result one, inappropriate planning was found to be the core problem of the district. 985% of the respondents approve the district has no meaningful political power that emanates from the council of the woreda rather that comes from the will of the political power.

#### **Lack of effective community Participation**

The research finding concerning to community participation in Irob district of Tigray region revealed that community participation is not more than the contribution of money and resource. Participation in decision making is too limited and is on minor issues. According to the interview respondents of this research everything is done only for the sake of formalism and their present did not impact on the local governance process.

*“I have never participated in any of the elections directly. I always send the government card through my son, because the government may ask me why I did not return it. I do not know the procedures and I do not know what they do after election. Because none of them have appeared in this area from the former contestants, even I do not personally know whether he was black or white”*

#### **Lack of financial and Human Capacities**

The research finding revealed that the Irob district of Tigray region is somehow endowed with very limited local resource. These include In the words of one of the interviewees “shortage of skilled manpower” is one of the most pronounced problems since the woreda poorly developed in terms of infrastructure. Material and facilities such as vehicles and equipment’s are also far

from adequate to cover the vast needs of the Woreda which has hindered the day-to-day undertakings of woreda government

## **DISCUSSION**

### **IMPLEMENTATION, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN IROB WOREDA**

#### **Local Governance Process and Inter-governmental Relations**

Governance is described as the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented or not implemented (Mulugeta, 2012). Provisions for regional autonomy and the relationship between each tier of government have been regulated by the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1995). The constitution clearly sets down federal and state powers. The principle of mutual respect, reciprocity and support are unequivocally stated. Article 39(1-4), *Rights of Nations, Nationalities and People* addresses responses to identity pressure, going further up to the possibility to secede.

To this effect one of the major reasons for the implementation of decentralization programs such as district level decentralization is to promote good governance, through inspiring accountability and transparency and grass roots participation at Woreda and Kebele levels to ensure the efficient implementation of the democratization and democratic decision-making process and local self-rule. This section tries to look at the local governance process by giving the overall picture of good governance status related to accountability, transparency and capacity issues in Irob Woreda to describe qualitatively.

Accountability is one of the basic principles of good governance. It is also the rationale of DLDP implementation in governance. Though introduced to ensure accountability the essence of accountability in Irob Woreda is somehow upward accountability to regional level organs and officials. Elements of neo patrimonialism have been found in the local district. It seems political structure at lower levels of government has become personalized at the cost of institutionalization. As a result downward accountability remained ineffective. This applies to all Woreda of the region implementing the DLDP. One of the key informants of Woreda officials argued that: “It has been



found that a patron-client relationship has become the chief hallmark of the governance structure. Nepotism is the order of the day. Loyalty to the party heads and higher officials is one of the criteria for getting the political positions in the Woreda”. There is some evidence of elite capture: Woreda cabinets: executives and other local elites control the resources of the Woreda in a way that harms the community. The absence of public accountability of the Woreda government is found mainly because of the strong influence and interference from the party in power to the extent of ousting the Woreda governments or officials who resist against the will and command of the party heads. Generally it has been found that the principle of reciprocity; it is a self-regulating form of interpersonal exchange, the maintenance of which depends on the return that each participant expects to obtain by rendering goods and services to each other and which ceases once the expected rewards fail to materialize. The relationship is particularistic and private; anchored only loosely in public law or community norms and weak trends of institutionalization. However, Rondinelli *et al.* (1989) cited in Frank Mabiriizii (2001:93) says, “Ultimately the success of decentralization policies hinges on institutional capacity building”.

The issue of transparency displayed mixed results. For instance in relation to the transparency of budgeting, the processes are generally done at Woreda levels by the coordination of experts of sector offices with a technical assistance from committees (including experts of different regional bureaus). The budget is then forwarded to the Woreda council for approval. The budget will be approved if the Woreda council is satisfied with it, but if not satisfied it may empower the finance committee to make appropriate adjustments to the budget before it was implemented. The feeling of the community on the Woreda government’s transparency in its planning process has been found limited. The result of the discussion with community in a focus group discussion shows that the community is unsatisfied about the transparency of planning process in the Woreda. It has been claimed by the residents that it is not open to the public and even the implementation of those decisions is not always transparent (discussion with the community, July 15, 2018). At local level, transparency is even more difficult as information flow is limited because most sector offices in the Woreda have limited means of transportation and budget. There are no established controls and procedures for financial information,

accountability and audits in relation to the other sector offices.

Generally, through the interviews the researcher came to know that authorities, responsibilities and functions given to the districts are not known by many of the development practitioners. They just run here and there instinctively, come up at the end of the month with no tangible result. As mentioned above there are no opposition parties or strong civil society organizations to provoke and put thrust on state functionaries in order to obtain congruent services.

### **Extent of Decentralization (Decision Making Power and Resources)**

The main objectives of the DLDP were, to promote good governance and strengthen democracy by enhancing accountability, transparency and responsiveness, empower people through enhanced participation in planning and decision making and creating a sense of ownership, enhance economic development, ensure equity and raise the living standards of the community by applying creative, competitive and all inclusive (the government, the private sector, the civil society organizations and the community at large) administration systems, strengthen downward and horizontal devolution of power in order to enhance local and sectoral capacities. The reason is the interest for decentralization is not the ethnic or identity interest only; it is also functional interest (Besley and Coate, 2003). However, as repeatedly said, the problem is not merely with the provision of authority in documents or even the question of just giving out power (empowerment), but using power (action) has a pivotal importance. The actual practices have been found always constrained by several implicit or explicit factors.

### **Assessing the Local Capacities of Irob Woreda**

Local capacity is not an end in itself; it is rather a means and a tool that allows the pursuit and accomplishment of a goal such as good governance and better service delivery to the local community. Local capacity is one of the major challenges and impediments in the implementation of the DLDP in the Woreda.

The local government of Irob Woreda suffers from capacity problems in all dimensions ranging from resources (human, financial, material, administrative, technical,) aspects. “Shortage of skilled manpower” is one of the most pronounced and frequently mentioned by



Woreda as well as community members of Irob. Material and facilities such as vehicles and equipment's are also far from adequate to cover the vast needs of the Woredas which has hindered the day-to-day undertakings of Woreda governments. Besides to, financial incapacity is yet another pressing problem in the implementation of the DLDP in the Woreda. Taking local capacity and work environment as a pressing issue Mulugeta (2012) stated the following:

*“Work environment includes the space, equipments used, individual and social connections (formal and informal) and physical safety of the workers that facilitate the work to be done. These include minimum functional facilities like: office settings, office facilities, quality and quantity of human power, equipment used to accomplish tasks and for mobility, inter and intra office communication technologies, job security and clear career development scheme and, above all, the social cohesion of the workers, work ethic and their relation with the service recipients”.*

### Community Participation in the Planning and Budgeting Process

Participation according to Jacob (2005 cited in Mahat, 2007) may be defined as: the capacity and the ability of the community to contribute, to share in and benefit from diverse social, economic, political or other processes of the society. The research findings on perception and participation of people in politics do not show much involvement in the Woreda. During election for instance, nomination is always top-down. The mobilization model explains that participation occurs when people anticipate opportunities in participating and also when they are persuaded by others. Notwithstanding illiteracy, media coverage is very low in our country. Interviewee AtoHagos (on 18/ 06/2018) from Ayga responded as follows when he has been asked how he participates in the elections:

*“I have never participated in any of the elections directly. I always send the government card through my son, because the government may ask me why I did not return it. I do not know the procedures and I do not know what they do after election. Because none of them have appeared in this area from*

*the former contestants, even I do not personally know whether he was black or white”*

According to the informants, in the research area it is in this pre - election that many employees were deployed to approach people door to door and persuade them (1) to get registered and to participate, (2) to appear at the polling station on time on the voting day, and, (3) to vote for the party. A lot of money, time and energy were spent only to serve formalism. This scarce resource could be better spent on more productive activities, installation of the communication system and other facilities first and foremost to increase people's understanding about election and their participation instead of spending it on something that has not been able to bring about change for years, just so as to satisfy the international community and deceive oneself.

Regarding the annual plan, there are sector specific and uniform formats for the *Tabias*<sup>1</sup> that should be carried out every year based on the time table prepared by the district administrative council and approved by the district council. This format includes the profile of the district in relation to the sector that submits the plan, achievements of the previous year, limitations and strengths observed and detailed plans for the current year with time table and costs. The attempt theoretically is to follow bottom-top approach of planning. *Tabias* prepare their independent plans, after the approval of the city council, and then submit them to the district council. For rural areas, individuals' plans are compiled by the *Tabia* and submitted to the *Kushets*. The *Tabia* administrative council compiles the plans of each *Tabia*, combine it with the plans of the sectors that operate in the *Tabia* (e.g., education, health, agriculture, communal works...) and submit them to the *Tabia* assembly for discussion and approval. After approval of the *Tabia* council (which is very formal in most cases) it goes to the district. The district planning committee sorts and prepares the district planning document.

The *Tabia* and *Kushets* in Irob Woreda *have* no regular workers except the managers. All officials work on a part time. Sometimes they forgo their regular work to deliver services in the *Tabia* and *Kushet* twice a week,

<sup>1</sup>Tabias are equivalent with Kebeles and are below the districts (Woredas) as well as *Kushets* are smaller administrative units below the *Tabia* or Kebele





for half a day they are exempted from their regular work to engage in this community service delivery task. But it is far less than what the work requires.

However, *Tabia managers* rarely appear at their offices, because they run a one-person office, and are usually a long distance away from control. These *Tabia managers* have no control over the health extension workers and development agents. All the *Tabia managers* from take their salary from “*Dowhan*” capital of the district. So, five days of a month with some additions are always spent for this purpose. Similarly, the development and extension agents also take their salaries from nearby accessible centers (where the cashiers from the district can reach with vehicle). But nobody comes to work place after the pay; they go visit families, friends and also do other personal matters. This takes about ten days in a month on average. The schools are better organized in this regard; only the director or person in charge goes to these centers and collects salaries. Others could also use the same system, or the schools could take this delegation and the service could be provided from one center.

Respondents in the Woreda 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 claimed that there is weak trend of involving the community to participate in planning and prioritizing their needs and deciding on different public sector delivery activities. Hence, the community involvement has been claimed only limited in contribution of labour and local materials insignificantly in a very rear times in the study area.

## CONSTRAINTS AND PROSPECTS OF DLDP IN THE WOREDA

### Constraints in the Implementation of Woreda Decentralization

Woredas and Kebeles are the lowest governments in the state structure which are very close to the people. As such, they should be provided with sufficient decision-making autonomy, administrative competencies and adequate resources to address the demands and concerns of the community. However, in Irob Woreda, it has been found that limited decision making autonomy, absence of political commitment, capacity constraints which include administrative, technical as well as resources

(manpower and material) to plan and implement their responsibilities to the satisfaction of the community.

### The Prospects

Irob Woreda can be very opportunist in that it is endowed of hard working community, and hence making use of the quality of hard working of the Irob community can be the good prospective. Besides to, the Woreda is endowed with tourist attractions areas like (Assimba Mountain, Enda’ba Zewengel) and honey production can be good source of finance for the local government and community.

## CONCLUSION

In general concerning to the implementation and practice of district level decentralization program in Irob district the following can be the major conclusions. One of the major concerns was the issue of *institutionalization*, and focus was given to structures, work environment and human power strength to find out how the DLDP has been institutionalized. Accordingly, results show that structures frequently changed without proper evaluation, which in turn affects the stability and productivity of institutions. However, changing structures alone cannot bring about change and development. If we frequently alter structures before thoroughly examining their strengths and limitations, having institutions in a full sense would be very difficult. Hence, there is a need to stabilize the institutional setting otherwise conscious changes. Most structural changes in the district take place. As many districts have conditions specific to their area, the structural changes need to be addressed individually. In addition to the research results also show that there are no enabling facilities: office, furniture, etc....to discharge responsibilities. With the current trend of budget allocation, no district can have a better working environment. The state has to prioritize the needs or focuses and provide facilities in phases. In the district posts are not task-oriented/task-driven. Some posts are setup just following the guidance from the political party office, but they need to be task driven. There should be a need to create the jobs/tasks before we create the boxes.

The other major issue discussed in this research was the *transfer and utilization of decision making authority and resources*: Focus has been given to the extent of the decision making authorities and resources transferred,



and how well the district utilizes them. Notwithstanding some interference in cases of intense security, there are no explicit restrictions on the authorities legally given to districts. Resources are also distributed from state level to districts through undisputable formulae. However the problem lies with the volume of resources that the state obtains. The second set of problem observed in Irob district was inability to exhaustively utilize the resources and authority transferred to the district.

The third issue was the *performance indicator: accordingly* attempts were made to measure the performance of the district since the commencement of the DLDP. As a result one, inappropriate planning was found to be the core problem of the district. If there were practices of realistic and result oriented planning, something tangible could be seen on the ground. All this lack of management and coordination would not happen if activities were well planned and coordinated. The district needs to prepare a realistic and achievable plan for itself within the frame of the state's strategic plan. Second, Staff cohesion has not yet been achieved. All the above elements contribute to staff cohesion. The recruitment policy and appointment of officials, and other staff, without any competition and transparency, decreases the trust of all qualified staff..

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