

Part I. Departure Points of the Research

This study assesses the purpose, structure and functions of ethnic decentralization system in Ethiopia taking as a case study the Gurage zone administration. There are six points of departure in assessing the performance of decentralization in Ethiopia.

A) The first point is the understanding of ethnic decentralization as a system. That means ethnic decentralization is not a decentralization of a particular institution, individual sector or service. It is a decentralization of power, resources and functions as a whole in the form and level of a system. By system is meant a collection of parts or subsystems that are interrelated in such a way that there is some sense in regarding them as a coherent entity. Ethnic decentralization encompasses fiscal, economic, political, administrative, legal and cultural subsystems. Each particular subsystem has its own objectives, interrelated components and characteristics. However, all the subsystems are causally and structurally merged into a higher and complex whole – an ethnically decentralized system.

B) The second point of departure is an attempt to differentiate between the system of decentralization (an institutional arrangement of devolving power and functions) and the political ideology that shaped it (in this case ethnicity). Decentralization is devolution of power to an autonomous sub-national unit and there is nothing wrong with that. The legal frameworks of decentralization enable the creation of an increasing number of public institutions and civil society associations through which power can be exercised. When there is a decreasing number of public institutions and civil society associations, there is no empowerment and can be no increasing involvement of the local people in the social, economic and political affairs of the country. Decentralization is working in many countries of the world and different international institutions are advocates for its implementation.

Decentralization is not, however, separated from the kind of political ideology used to configure it. The reason for decentralization in Ethiopia is the desire to solve ethnic conflicts on a permanent basis. This is the rationale of the political ideology of ethnicity that perceives social, political and economic conflicts between groups of people in view of a constructed identity. Regardless of whose objectives and interests it promotes, ethnicity is founded on the existence of ethnic domination and conflicts. According to this view, the solution to the ethnic problem is not only a demand for cultural liberation, but also a demand for political and economic autonomy of the ethnic groups. The sovereignty or self-government of the ethnic group is considered as an expression of the liberation of the group from domination. Accordingly, the group should be conferred with political, economic, fiscal, administrative, cultural and legal powers to exercise its right of self-determination. In that sense, ethnic decentralization, unlike other types of decentralization, encompasses all dimensions of power and authority. Ethnic decentralization is anchored primarily on the very idea and principle of self-determination, not on the ground of efficiency in the use and mobilization of scarce economic resources.

C) The third point of departure refers to the differentiation between the system of ethnic decentralization and the system of ethnic federation. A careful analysis is required to isolate the problems of federation and decentralization and to identify their convergence and divergence. The Federal Government and the regional states are not one and the same, and one is not the extension of the other. The Federal Government is more than a mere collection of ethnic groups – neither it is the sum total of their functions. It is a center where there is an interaction, interrelation and articulation of ethnic group interests whose synergetic effects is

meant to keep the unity. Even if there is a convergence between the two systems, since both make up the strategic components of solving ethnic conflicts on a permanent basis, there are fundamental differences in the power, functions and purposes of ethnic federation and ethnic decentralization.

The fundamental purpose of ethnic federation is to achieve unity and understanding among the constituent ethnic groups. Ethnic federation has its own structure, specific functions to perform and distinct purposes to achieve. The purpose and functions of the Federal Government aim at solving conflicts around the issues of: i) identifying the identity of ethnic groups, ii) identifying the territorial location of ethnic groups, iii) ethnic cleansing and minority rights, iv) asymmetric power relation, v) unsynchronized decentralization, vi) intergovernmental fiscal relations, vii) equitable development and interregional cooperation, viii) self-determination and secession. These objectives and functions make ethnic federation different from other types of federation formed on the basis of different ideology. In addition to the common “federal functions”, such as defence and foreign affairs, the problems of solving ethnic conflicts give rise to additional structural elements and functions peculiar to the system of ethnic federation.

On the other hand, the regional ethno-linguistically defined states are the focal points where one locates primarily the contradiction between competing political and economic interest groups belonging to the same ethnic group. The objectives, functions and conflicts belonging to the regional states include the following issues: ethnic group empowerment, ethnic group protection, ethnic group cohesion, promoting ethnic group identity, empowering civil society, promoting the economic and social welfare of the ethnic group, conservation and management of natural resources, and capacity development of the group.

D) The fourth point of departure of this study refers to the theoretical assumptions used to assess the performance of the structure and functions of the system of decentralization. The quality of measuring the structure and functions of the system of decentralization is guided and built on theoretical assumptions which link three necessary conditions. Successful decentralization must have i) an appropriate structure, ii) a democratic system of governance, and iii) an adequate capacity.

An appropriate structural design produces a more responsive public sector, while a wrong design is a guarantee for non-performance. But there is no blueprint for recommending or adopting the best organizational structure for any type of decentralization. Appropriateness of organizational structure depends on many factors, including the following: the specific objectives of decentralization (functional and geographical needs), the initial conditions in the country, the political interests that support decentralization, the regional/local capacity and context, the clarity of the rules and the division of the roles among tiers of government, the timing and synchronization of the various elements of reform.

A successful decentralization must have at least political, economic, fiscal, and administrative components that are considered together when designing decentralization. The absence of one dimension can lead to a very different outcome. However, depending on the context, decentralization should be applied progressively, not all at once and the same moment. The making of decentralization must be seen as a process that is based on political will and partnership. This process facilitates a normative framework for decentralization.

Decentralization is not only an organizational structure, i.e., a pattern according to which tasks and responsibilities have already been formally allocated. Decentralization also refers to the dynamic features of the actual decision-making process (i.e., governance). Just because a governmental unit is smaller in scope does not necessarily mean that the people are going to be involved in governing their own affairs. Regional and local governors may be unresponsive to the needs and demands of the people. The decision-making may not be transparent and predictable. If there is no local people participation, accountability may not be achieved because powerful local elite make it difficult despite a formal election system. Devolution can only be a real self-governing exercise if it is based on the principles of democratic governance. The relevant characteristics for good governance are participation, accountability, representation, responsiveness, transparency and the rule of law. These characteristics are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Transparency requires that governments consult broadly to ascertain citizen interests, publicize plans and decisions, share information widely and in good time, and consistently act in an open manner.

Appropriate design structure and good governance do not by themselves ensure devolution of power. The benefits of decentralization cannot be realized without adequate financial and human resource capacity at the regional and local levels. Effective devolution will occur when elected local administrations have the necessary level of qualified personnel, financial resources, skills and knowledge to formulate, implement, and enforce policy decisions. Although the size, wealth and previous administration's experience of the ethnic groups have their own effects, such variables as the quality of management skill (supply and availability of technical and specialized fields), the quality of the system of operating procedures (working programmes, information and monitoring systems) and adequate management resources (finance, human, information and equipment), are indicators of regional/local capacity.

Performance assessment of decentralization must take into account the dimensions of organizational structure, governance and capacity concurrently. To treat one or two of these dimensions without considering the rest is bound to be insufficient. The understanding of the issues involved in the organizational structure and system of governance cannot by themselves attain improvement in the system. A reform in governance and/or structural design by itself does not improve performance. To bring about real decentralization and to generate significant improvement in the performance of the system, a concurrent examination of possible adjustments in all three dimensions is necessary.

E) The fifth point of departure of this study refers to the criteria used for selecting performance measuring variables and indicators. Variables and indicators provide a basis for assessing how well the system is designed and has succeeded in achieving its intended objectives. Variables refer to the concepts and result statements that are being measured. The selection and development of variables is based on the construction of a results-chain continuum model. Indicators provide the quantitative and qualitative details of the identified variables. In this study the overall performance of the total system is measured against comprehensive variables and indicators referring to the subjective and material well-being of the ethnic group. For assessing the state and viability of the structure and functions of the system, I used those properties of the subsystems that have direct effects on the sustainability of the total system. Implementation and outcome types of indicators were chosen to assess the conditions, progress and effects of decentralization.

F) The sixth point of departure of this study refers to the environment of the system of decentralization. As it is known, systems operate and interact with the larger, varied environment. The environment conditions both the activities and objectives of a given

regional state. Environmental system indicators consist of two broad categories, namely macro (international/national) and micro (regional/local) variables. The macro environment indicators include international support, national social policies, national economic policies, institutional arrangements, civil war and drought factors. The micro level (regional/local) indicators include language and religion of the ethnic group, territory of the ethnic group, ethnic group identity, and socioeconomic characteristics of the ethnic group. The environmental variables can affect what is possible and what is desirable.

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