

The emergence of local government in Ethiopia

Until recently, local government in Ethiopia was treated as a 'stepchild' of central and regional government. Although a strongly federal government has been in place since 1995, devolution of power has largely been limited to the regional level without any clear definition of the lower tiers of government.



One of the main streets in downtown Addis Ababa, the capital of the East African state of Ethiopia.

That is gradually changing, however, following the introduction of the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme (SDPRP), which has components of 'governance and decentralisation as its building blocks'. The local government that since the days of the imperial regime served as field administrative agent, subordinated to the central government, is now emerging as an autonomous unit with a mandate of bringing government closer to the people, empowering communities and delivering the most needed services to the community thereby 'tackling poverty directly at the grassroots level'.

The constitutional context

In a significant departure from the traditions of African states, Ethiopia has ventured on a bold experiment that has seen the marrying of federalism with ethnicity. Ethnicity constitutes one of the major features of the Constitution adopted in 1995 and the basis for the internal organisation of the federal state. The federal system was motivated by the need to accommodate ethnic diversity within a common political and economic community. Based on this constitutional principle, the Constitution establishes a two-tier federal government. Nine states that are largely demarcated along ethno-linguistic lines comprise the federal state of Ethiopia. The state governments, or regional states, as they are often referred to, are entrusted with original legislative, executive and judicial powers.

Multi-layered local government characterises the administration below regional government. To be precise, there are three levels of local government within each regional state. The lowest local government unit is 'kebele' followed by 'wereda'. In the hierarchy between the regions and the weredas are unelected, state-appointed administrative units called 'zones'. This makes Ethiopia a federal state with five levels of government. However, it is important to note that the federal

constitution only refers to the federal and state levels of government. The lower levels of government are the creatures of either regional constitutions or statutory reforms.

The Constitution does not explicitly recognise local government but there is no doubt that it clearly envisages a system of local government. This is evident from article 54 of the Constitution, which states that state government shall be established at state and administrative levels that they find necessary. It further states that "adequate power shall be granted to the lowest units of government to enable people to participate directly in the administration of such units". Two important points flow from this. First, local government is the responsibility of regional governments. The power to determine the authority and functions of any local government, such as a wereda or kebele administration, is a matter left to the regional states. The federal government enjoys no power in that regard. Second, however, the establishment of local government is not at the unfettered discretion of state governments. As is clearly stated in the Constitution, the state governments must establish local governments that are autonomous and accountable to the local electorate.

The recent devolution of power to local government focuses on the wereda level, which has now become the most important level of local government.

Structure and composition

As local government is the responsibility of regional governments, the structure, power and functions of wereda government are bound to vary from one region to another. A survey of the local government systems in each regional state does, however, indicate a common wereda government setup across the states.

Each wereda is composed of a unicameral deliberative body and an executive committee. The wereda council is a directly elected deliberative body that is headed by a wereda chairperson, who is elected by the council from among its members. Composed of part-time, unpaid members, the council convenes four times a year. The main function of this legislative body is to approve the budget and social and economic plans of the locality. The council also decides on the allocation of the intergovernmental transfers it receives from the regional government among the different sector programmes. As a body that exercises oversight function over the wereda executive, it has the authority to review the work progress of the different sectors and bureaus of the executive committee.

The day to day administration of a wereda is performed by

the executive committee. The committee is headed by a chairman who is elected by the wereda council and automatically becomes the chief administrator of the wereda. Composed of 11 to 13 elected members that are drawn from the wereda council, the committee is responsible for implementing decisions made by the council. The executive committee, which is answerable to the council, is organised into different sectors with most members of the committee heading sector office, such as education, health, agricultural and rural development, youth and social affairs. The heads of each sector offices are appointed by the chief administrator and approved by the council.

Powers and functions

The regional constitutions define the powers and functions of wereda governments. The revised constitution of the Oromia regional state entrusts wereda governments with the responsibility of planning, budgeting and implementing public service delivery. Weredas are empowered to deliver basic services such as agricultural extension, primary education, primary health, water supply and rural roads. In the Amhara regional state, a similar range of powers is devolved to wereda government. This includes primary education service, basic health care service, agricultural extension services, veterinary service, land-use rights administration, water development, well construction and maintenance, local police service and local road access.

Financing local government

Wereda governments are not entrusted with taxation powers. They do not have the power to mobilise and raise revenue themselves. Although decisions have been made to assign personal income tax from wereda employees and small traders, rental income from individuals, rural land use fees, agricultural income taxes, licenses, and fees from services rendered by wereda offices to weredas, the practical realisation has been limited. The regional governments have not been willing to share their revenue sources with wereda governments. As a result all taxation powers remain with the regional governments including property rates, which are the most common source of revenue for local government in many other countries.

The lack of own-source revenue has compelled the weredas to rely heavily on transfers from the regional governments. The major mechanism through which revenue is transferred to wereda governments is known as a block grant which accounts for the lion's share of wereda budgets. Using a replica of the

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federal government revenue allocation formula, the regional government allocate the grants among Wereda governments. The most important element of the revenue allocation formula is population size (55%) followed by development index (25%), revenue sharing effort (15%) and poverty level index (10%). This particular intergovernmental transfer accounts for no less than 95% of wereda governments' revenue.

The fiscal dependence of wereda governments becomes more glaring when one notes that they do not have the autonomy to decide on the utilisation of the grant they receive from the regional governments. Despite a legal framework that grants expenditure autonomy to wereda governments and thus presents block grants as unconditional transfers, directives from regional government, and even sometimes from zonal governments, often guide wereda councils in the allocation of the transfers to the different sectoral programmes. This means local community needs and preferences are put on the back burner while regional and federal government priorities take precedence. The regional governments thus use the block grants in ways that advance expenditure in priority areas that are decided by them.

The financial autonomy of wereda governments is further weakened by the fact that they do not even receive financial support that matches their expenditure responsibilities. Their meagre amount from the state budget does not go beyond covering the salaries of state employees and public services. On average 91% of weredas' annual budgets are earmarked for administrative and operational expenditures, with most of the budget going to salaries for teachers, health workers and personnel working in wereda administrative offices. This means wereda governments are left with little leeway for experimentation to design developmental projects that respond to the developmental needs of their constituents. They have, for example, little or no budget for undertaking capital projects and expanding public services. The financial dependence of wereda governments is also evident from the fact that they have

little or no say in the amount of revenue transferred to them.

Another challenge has been the increasing assignment of functions and responsibilities to wereda governments without corresponding transfers of resources and capacity. Unfunded mandates have become major challenges to wereda governments. The elected wereda councillors complain that mandates without the needed resources have created public mistrust and led to cynicism about the ability of local government to deliver on its promises.

Relations with other upper levels of government

The democratically constituted decision-making bodies of wereda governments are not accountable to their local electorate only. According to the envisaged relationship between the regional government and the different tiers of local government, the wereda councils are accountable to the regional councils as well. The constitution of the Amhara regional state goes beyond that and states that wereda administrations are not only accountable to the regional government but are also a subordinate body of the regional government. It is not clear, however, if the subordination of wereda governments to regional government can meet the challenge of constitutionality in light of the constitutional requirement that autonomous units of governments be established at lower levels of government.

Special zones and special weredas

A discussion of the Ethiopian local government would not be complete without a few words on the unique position that some zonal levels of government and weredas enjoy in some of the regional states as a result of the ethnic basis of the federal system.

In most regions, zonal administrations are administrative agents of the regional states as they are unelected and state-appointed. They have neither councils nor executive administrations that can qualify them as 'self-governing authorities'. Their role is often limited to providing administrative support in preparing budgets and assisting in the administration and governance of wereda governments. They sometimes exercise oversight power over the weredas.

The place of zonal administration is, however, radically different in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPR), which is situated in the southern part of Ethiopia sharing borders with Kenya and Sudan. The SNNPR, unlike other regional states, is not ethnically defined as

it is home to a dozen ethnic groups. In order to respond to the constitutional requirement of ensuring self-government and equitable representation of the different ethnic groups, the ethnically defined zonal administrations of the SNNPR are entrusted with a unique status. In contrast to their counterparts in other regional states, zonal administrations in the SNNPR are recognised by the regional constitution as an autonomous tier of local government with constitutionally mandated elected councils and executive administrations.

Another anomalous feature of the multi-layered local government is the establishment of special weredas in some of the regional states. Normally, weredas are part of a zone. With a view to accommodating minorities within a regional state, however, a number of regional constitutions have amended their constitutions to provide for the establishment of ethnically defined special weredas that do not form part of zones. Functioning as autonomous entities, these ethnically defined special weredas provide those minorities with the territorial space that is necessary to manage their own affairs. They are also vested with powers and functions that are relevant for the self-management of a community. They are entrusted with autonomous executive and legislative organs.

Comment

The establishment of local government with adequate powers is envisaged by the federal Constitution and given effect to by regional constitutions. The formal autonomy of wereda government is, however, largely curtailed by the excessive supervision and control they are subjected to by the regional governments. Their autonomy is also compromised by their heavy fiscal dependence on regional governments. Be that as it may, the establishment of autonomous local governments marks a major departure from the age-old subordination of local government to a highly centralised national government. As is the case with local governments in many other states, it is hoped that regional states in Ethiopia will, in time, develop an effective policy and legal framework for wereda government, making the latter a major partner in empowering local communities, enhancing public participation and ensuring adequate service delivery.



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