

The Practice of Decentralisation in Terms of Community Participation in Decision-Making

Mekuriaw Chanie^{1*} and Sachin K. Parappagoudar²

{mekuriawchanie@yahoo.com¹, dr.sachin_k@cms.ac.in²}

Public Policy and Governance, Jain University, Bangalore, India¹, Management, Jain University, Bangalore, India²

Abstract. Participatory decision-making is the urge for decentralization. Nevertheless, in Ethiopia, decisions are not made based on shared understanding and marginalized voices are increasing. We used a mixed method, and the data was analysed through convergent parallel design. Grounded on theoretical lenses of democratic decentralization and democratic decision-making approaches, our findings fail to support the decentralization of community participation in decision-making at the grassroots level due to the absence of legally entrenched and visible participatory structures as well as the low performance of local administrators in mobilizing the community in the revenue-generating and budgeting process. All of these made the community lack interest in decentralization and less likely to participate in the process. Hence, at the local government level, the practice of decentralization is more promising than apprehending inclusive participation.

Keywords: community participation, decentralisation, decision-making, Ethiopia, and local government.

1 Introduction

This study focuses specifically on analyzing decentralization from the perspective of community participation based on Ethiopia's constitution, policies, and laws. Various decentralization policies and strategies impose obligations on local governments to promote community participation. However, in Ethiopia, as in other developing countries, the government dominates the decision-making process, contributing to an environment unfavorable to people's participation [1]. More specifically, in many urban local governments in the Gambella region, the study area, both local governments and their elected representatives are not active in local government decision-making, except perhaps when voting. The success of community engagement implementation depends on the interplay of

different factors [2]. In the Ethiopian context, one of these factors is the decentralization law. In this study, the two variables, decentralization and participation, influence each other.

Ethiopia has enacted broad decentralization initiatives, but the system still operates under a broad, highly centralized hierarchical framework that severely limits the ability of local governments to carry out their functions. In contrast to wealthy nations, local administrations actually have upward accountability, even though their organizational structure appears to be oriented downward. In Ethiopia, this circumstance compromises the autonomy of local governments and the rights of the people to make decisions. When one travels from Ethiopia's center to its periphery—the Gambella region—the effects of decentralization are readily apparent. Decentralization would not lead to equitable involvement in political and economic decision-making processes in the Gambella region. Although the indigenous population is more involved in politics, they are less involved in the economy, where the non-indigenous community is more active [3].

This article attempts to answer the question: "To what extent can decentralization bring local governments closer to local communities?" The underlining of this study shows that decentralization, at the grass-roots level, as a policy remained poorly analysed, designed, and implemented unfair manner. Our article consists of four main sections: First, draw an introduction based on supporting literature. Next, let's look back at our research methods. Presentation and discussion of results will take place in the third section, and conclusions follow at the end.

1.1 The trend of decentralization, participation, and local government

Decentralization is a broad concept. We support research findings, arguments, and conclusions by reinforcing fundamental concepts through literature reviews. In this context, local populations in some parts of Latin America and Europe called for local democracy in the 1990s. In other parts of Africa, such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Uganda, ethnic tensions play a major role, and decentralization policies are viewed from a conflict management perspective [4]. Empirical research also suggests that some countries have failed to resolve conflicts by adopting decentralization [5]. The effectiveness or failure of decentralization depends on the country's context, namely the dynamics of the party system, the involvement of constitutional builders, and the commitment of leaders at all levels of government, especially national leaders [6]. In another dimension, decentralization of power is a prerequisite for community participation for certain reasons such as abuse of power, corruption, and favoritism, but it is not immune to criticism [7].

Despite diverse meanings of participation, for this study, participation means that "people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives and operationalise as a process through which the community involved in and has an influence on decisions related to governance and development activities that affect them" [8]. The significance of community participation can be conceptualized by analyzing the advantages

and disadvantages of participation. When people get the opportunity to participate, they develop belongingness, increasing their sense of control over issues that affect them. However, some scholars reflect on the negative side of it. Community participation does not have a transparent approach, which leads to a lack of clear goals and objectives, and that success cannot be guaranteed [9].

The main responsibility of municipal governments is to strengthen local democracy [10]. Communities make democratic decisions about the future course of their destiny and the services to be supplied through the means of local governments. How well they can represent and authenticate their constituents in public choices is the issue that matters. There are still many unanswered questions in the literature regarding whether decentralization permits local managers to consider their neighborhood or the community near the local government for choices [11].

1.2 Significance of Community Participation

Most community participation in local decision-making literature asserts that it is an indicator of good governance and is integrally linked with democratic governmental principles. Although debated, its encouragement is promoted from within a community by social capital and structural characters that initiate people to participate. At all levels of government, institutions play a major role in community participation by addressing the demands and guidelines of support. In such a case, democratic practices and different projects are being demonstrated to bring sustainable development and peace [12].

The proponents of the community-based participatory approach emphasize community participation in decision-making as an essential tool for promoting social services, good governance, and development. However, some scholars reflect on the negative side of it. Community participation does not have a transparent approach, which leads to a lack of clear goals and objectives, and that success cannot be guaranteed. Since the evaluation process is complex, a lack of accountability among practitioners is created [13]. In addition to taking high costs in terms of money, time, and skills, the participation implementation also depends on the community's attitude. In other words, the awareness or literacy level is a challenging factor, so there is a chance of marginalization by professional and technical communication during the decision-making process. Community participation can also bring latent conflicts to the surface and delay the project [14].

On the other hand, increasingly significant funding for local administrative matters has been required as a result of decentralization in general and the establishment of local governments in particular [15]. A key concern has always been the overall policy that decides who should be subject to taxes. Horizontal equity as a principle implies without discrimination in terms of ethnicity and other grounds; every community member equal position should be made to pay the same amount of taxes [16].

In general, effective public participation requires the ability of local governments to exercise full autonomy, which decentralization confers. If local governments only loosely define the functions over which they exercise full autonomy, they are unlikely to attract meaningful

community participation, and decisions in such cases will depend on local circumstances, choices, and preferences [17].

1.3 Theoretical perspectives

We found that half of the studies cited some form of decentralization theory [18]. Proponents of democratic decentralization theory believe that decentralization is simply an opportunity for communities to participate in local political processes by making local governments accountable to voters and delegating resources and decision-making authority to lower levels [19]. This theory was used in the study because it provides a plausible explanation. In this context, decentralization as a governance principle and a tool for realizing community participation becomes meaningless unless governments respond to the needs and desires of local communities. The proponents of democratic decentralisation argue that transferring resources and decision-making power to the lower level of government would not be an accurate definition of decentralisation. Instead, it merely includes local authorities to be accountable to their electorates and create community participation opportunities in the local political process. The administrative apparatus must be more conducive for public representatives who are accountable and responsible to their communities. In the context of democratic decentralisation theory, this means that both the federal and regional governments enable local authorities to fulfill this obligation [20]

2. Methods

This study used an exploratory and descriptive mixed methods research strategy. Questionnaire surveys, focused group discussions, and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods used in the study. Primary data was collected from surveyed households, government officials, and civil society organizations. At the same time, secondary data were collected from case studies, books, government policies and declarations. Similarly, a formula developed by Krejcie, R. V. and Morgan, D. W. (1970) was used to determine a sample size of 442 (of which 12 were non-responders and 430 were responders) for the quantitative study [21]. The target group was the population of Gambella, and the 17,625 households in five cities were used as the sampling frame, from which a sample size of 442 was selected. In the quantitative domain, simple random, multistage, stratified, and proportional sampling methods were used. However, purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling were used to select participants for the interview and focus group discussion. Qualitative data from interviews were collected until saturation level was reached.

The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics with SPSS 16 Version and thematic way, respectively. To get an accurate and consistent result and in order to accomplish the specified objective of the research as well as the valid and reliable creation and usage of the instruments, the author devised a pilot-test strategy. Based on the findings of a pilot research, the questionnaire's dependability was evaluated. Pre-testing the

instrument is possible using a pilot study. In order to evaluate the reliability of the scales in the questionnaire, Cornbrash's alpha was used. Fifty questionnaires were distributed to evaluate the reliability of the survey. Based on the outcomes of this data, reliability was then examined. Ethical principles were considered throughout the study.

3. Findings

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution was established as the legal framework for decentralization policy. On the contrary, the constitution of Gambella, as amended in 2002, does not equally recognize autonomy at the grassroots level. Table 1 shows this.

Table 1. Seats of representative councils of indigenous and non-indigenous people

Town/city Towns	Total Population	Communities				Total
		Indigenous		Non-indigenous		
		Population in No.	Representation in %	Population in No.	Representation in %	
Gambella	58227	23,123	112 (133.3%)	35,104	7 (8.3 %)	119
Abobo	6103	2,903	27 (8.1%)	3,200	3 (0.81%)	30
Meti	10654	3,540	26 (7.8%)	7,114	4 (1.04%)	30
Larie	4254	2600	29 (8.7%)	1654	1 (0.29%)	30
Etang	8890	4001	27 (8.1%)	4889	3 (0.81%)	30

Source: developed by author (2021)

Another takeaway from our findings is that visible and enabling structures are needed to coordinate and mobilize communities in decision-making processes through these substructures. Article 89(6) of the FDRE Charter provides that the government must involve the public at all levels in the formulation of national development policies and plans. In this case, the Gambella Regional Constitution does not in any of its articles provide guarantees for sub-local structures such as the development team or the 1:5 networks. Figure 1 addresses this.

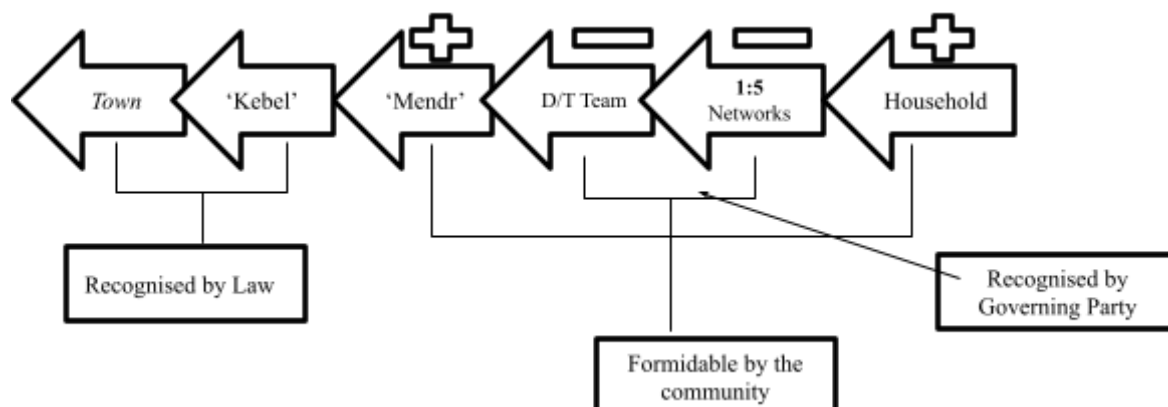


Fig.1. Urban Local governance sub-administration participatory structure

Considering all the above insights, we have addressed important questions regarding the acceptance of decentralization. In this context, we asked respondents about their current interest in decentralization. The overall results of the survey are that 30.9% (N=133) of the respondents are somewhat interested in the current decentralization, 61.4% (N=264) are not very interested, and 7.7% (N= 33) shows no interest at all.

It is well established that citizens' participatory budgeting may mirror the strength of decentralization as manifested in fiscal devolution. Regarding this, survey participants were questioned if the community makes budgetary decisions or if the local government administration appropriately collects taxes from people. Table 2 illustrates this.

Table 2. Proper tax collection by Local Government

Valid	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Somewhat	128	29.8	29.8	29.8
Make less effort	264	61.4	61.4	91.2
Does not make any effort	20	4.7	4.7	95.8
Neutral or DK	18	4.2	4.2	100.0
Total	430	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 reveals that 29.8% (N=128) of the respondents were somewhat interested in the government tax collection capacity and the power of the community to decide on budget allocation. 61.4% (N=264) of local governments made less effort to collect taxes, 4.7% (N=20) did not make an effort, and 4.2% (N=18) could not say.

4. Discussion

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) states that “all Ethiopians shall participate in national development and be consulted in particular on policies and projects affecting national development. Contrary to the philosophy of decentralization policy, not all communities in the Gambella region are given equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. For example, Table 1 shows a representative sample of various urban municipalities in the Gambella region, where the number of seats of non-indigenous people on the council is lower than the number of seats for indigenous communities.

The effectiveness of community participation depends on the appropriate design of organizational structures supported by law. In this case, the Gambella Regional Constitution does not provide explicit constitutional guarantees for lower-level management structures such

as the development team or 1:5 networks¹. Development teams and 1-5 cell structures are party-oriented and are not permitted by any law. The community views these structures negatively as secret agent structures. They have a negative perception. *'Mender'* and household structures are socially acceptable positively because various communities have long used these structures during times of war and religious activity. Many of those surveyed expected new and complementary platforms to replace these party-centered structures. Focus group discussion participants said that local governments in the Gambella region use their authority and power to do whatever they want arbitrarily their self-administration power to protect their guilty and misuse of resources, abusing human and democratic rights. This has led to negative perceptions of decentralization in the community.

Many of the local administrators during the interview reflect that the platforms of local governments are visible: Town/District-Kebelle- 'Gott' or zone-Development team- cell or 1 to 5 households. However, at each level of the structure, the communities are not actively involved during the decision-making process unless there is a penalty for absentees. Additionally, the structures are considered governing party instruments by the community and are not considered democratic platforms for all.

Similar findings have been made by [22]. These academics contend that the sub-administrative structures, however, are particularly beneficial in fostering cooperation, collaboration, learning from one another, and problem-solving in groups. Our research contradicts their conclusions because the community would not accept these substructures to foster collaboration or teach one another how to handle problems unless they were endorsed by proclamation or constitution. We discovered that decentralization is believed to increase public participation through opening democratic systems from the standpoint of democratic decentralization theory. Contrary to this hypothesis, the lack of legally enshrined, readily discernible, and supportive local government participatory mechanisms has led to the majority of communities not taking part in their local administration decision-making process.

As Table 2 depicts, the region's weak performance in generating sufficient revenue from the community creates a shortage of finance to cover its total expenditure. The majority of local council participants in the interview assured that, there is a big gap between the budget plan for execution and the actual performance. The document analysis made on the 2020's Regional Fiscal Annual Report stated, the region can cover only not more than 46% of the total expenditure. This forced the region to negotiate with the federal government for borrowing as a block grant. This can be inferred from the fact that from 2008-20012, more than 55% were block grants from the federal government. However, this regional debit borrowed from the federal government is deducted annually from its budget. This budget deduction and the inability and weak performance of revenue or lack of collecting taxes

¹ 1: 5 Network: is the sub-division of the Development Team encompassing 1 to 5 residents; *'Kebelle'*: is the lower administrative unit below city/urban administrative; *'Mender'*: is the administrative arrangement below *'Kebelle'* encompasses 40 to 120 residents; and Developmental Team: is the sub-division of *'Mender'* and encompassing 20 to 40 residents of 1: 5 network.

properly remain the region uncover its expenditure. Indeed, this leads to a cumulative effect negatively on the region's participatory development and governance agenda.

This finding is also similar to what has been studied by Gebre-Egzhiaber & Gebreselassie Gebreyes (2014b), who addressed that the share of own revenue to the total 13 districts budget in Gambella region is 14.83%, while the share of regional transfers to districts budget is 85.17%. However, these scholars put a narrow tax base as the reason for this fiscal position, and yet this study on the contrary, stands a lack of community awareness and less mobilization to participate in the budgeting and planning process as a primary reason.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we explored the practice of decentralisation policies in terms of community participation in the Gambella region of Ethiopia. We discovered that the practical implementation of decentralization policies at the local level in Ethiopia did not lead to equitable participation and caused the communities to disintegrate. Sub-administrative institutions are less well-liked by the populace at the grassroots level. The majority of the people might not participate in the decision-making process unless these platforms require deliberate, conscious guidance to reform.

One of the main causes of the uneven application of decentralization strategy at the local level may be people's attitudes toward it and their decreased participation in decision-making. The purpose of decentralization policy is jeopardized when local governors make decisions that neglect the community, according to the tenets of decentralization theory. In any event, it's a well-known argument that poor performance on their own revenue makes local governments dependent on the region, which then depends on the federal government. This suggests that local governments' susceptibility to manipulation by the federal or regional governments would be unstoppable until local administrators organize the community to boost their income performance.

Unfortunately, because of financial limitations, this study was designed in an equally technical manner to examine some aspects of decentralization. Consequently, our generalizability is insufficient to demonstrate the complete process of decentralization strategies; additional research is needed.

Acknowledgment: It is appropriate to acknowledge Mr. Haftu Woldu and Hailemeleket Terefe for their assistance in editing this essay.

References

- [1] R. Gjoni, A. Wetterberg, and D. Dunbar, "Decentralization as a conflict transformation tool: The challenge in Kosovo." *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 291-312, 2010, doi: 10.1002/pad.577.

- [2] P. K. Mogomotsi, L. S. Stone, G. E. J. Mogomotsi, and N. Dube, "Factors influencing community participation in wildlife conservation." *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 372-386, 2020, doi: 10.1080/10871209.2020.1748769.
- [3] M. Samson and T. Tegegne, "The practice of fiscal decentralization at local level in Ethiopia: Evidence from Oromia and Afar Regional States.", *Cogent Social Sciences*, vol.9, no.2, 2023, doi: 10.1080/23311886.2023.2241260
- [4] B. Engdaw, "The effect of administrative decentralization on quality public service delivery in Bahir Dar city administration: the case of Belay Zeleke sub-city." *Cogent Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, doi: 10.1080/23311886.2021.2004675.
- [5] R. Gjoni, A. Wetterberg, and D. Dunbar, "Decentralization as a conflict transformation tool: The challenge in Kosovo." *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 291-312, 2010, doi: 10.1002/pad.577.
- [6] O. A. Shevtsov, "Development of Local Self-government and Implementation of Decentralization in Europe." *Law Bulletin*, no. 13, p. 167, 2020, doi: 10.32850/lb2414-4207.2020.13.21.
- [7] R. Gjoni, A. Wetterberg, and D. Dunbar, "Decentralization as a conflict transformation tool: The challenge in Kosovo." *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 291-312, 2010, doi: 10.1002/pad.577.
- [8] J. Pisano, "Meanings Of Participation." *Staging Democracy*, pp. 113-135, 2022, doi: 10.7591/cornell/9781501764066.003.0007.
- [9] M. T. Mia, M. Islam, J. Sakin, and J. Al-Hamadi, "The Role of Community Participation and Community-Based Planning in Sustainable Community Development." *Asian People Journal (APJ)*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 31-41, 2022, doi: 10.37231/apj.2022.5.1.296.
- [10] L. K. Yang and Y. Abbas, "General-Purpose Local Government Defaults: Type, Trend, and Impact." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.3472118.
- [11] L.M. Jhansi, "Democratic Decentralisation: Indian Experiences". *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol.10, no.1, pp.109-118, <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2201141.pdf>
- [12] Chirenje et al, "Local communities' participation in decision-making processes through planning and budgeting in African countries." *Chinese Journal of Population Resources and Environment*, vol 11, no.1, pp.10-16, doi: 10.1080/10042857.2013.777198
- [13] E.S. Jessika, and J.M.Tai, "Community-based participatory research with Indigenous youth: a critical review of literature." *An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, vol.18, no.1, pp 192-202, <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801221089033>
- [14] A.Aryeh-Adjei, S.Anang, and D.Osei-Adusah, "Local Participation in Community-Based Development Projects in Ghana." *International Journal of Social Ecology and Sustainable Development*, vol13, pp.1-13,2022.
- [15] A. Elhamma, "The relationship between budgetary evaluation, firm size and performance." *Journal of Management Development*, vol. 34, no. 8, pp. 973-986, 2015, doi: 10.1108/jmd-06-2014-0053.
- [16] T. D. Nguyen, "Fiscal Decentralisation and Economic Growth: Evidence from Vietnam." *Decentralization and Development of Sri Lanka Within a Unitary State*, pp. 287-309, 2017, doi: 10.1007/978-981-10-4259-1_13.
- [17] N. Stame, "Local Governments and Community-Based Partnerships." *Evaluation & Development*, pp. 181-182, 2018, doi 10.4324/9781351323925-20.
- [18] B. C. Smith, "Decentralization in Theory." *Decentralization*, pp. 18-45, 2023, doi 10.4324/9781003404927-2.

- [19] C. Panara, "Concept and Role of Local Self-Government in the Contemporary State." *Theoretical Foundations and Discussions on the Reformation Process in Local Governments*, pp. 42-84, doi: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0317-0.ch003.
- [20] M. Huber and A. Arnberger, "Factors Influencing the Level of Local Participation in Planning and Management of the Planned Salzburger Lungau & Kärntner Nockberge Biosphere Reserve in Austria." *Sustainability*, vol. 13, no. 17, p. 9685, 2021, doi: 10.3390/su13179685.
- [21] K. J. Rejtzie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 30(3), 607–610
- [22] Y. W. Bekele and D. J. Kjosavik, "Decentralised Local Governance and Poverty Reduction in Post-1991 Ethiopia: A Political Economy Study." *Politics and Governance*, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 1-15, 2016, doi: 10.17645/pag.v4i4.590.