

The Contest of Participatory Power: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People in Africa-Ethiopia

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Abstract. As endorsed by UDHR, ICCPR human rights declaration, and the constitution of Ethiopia, every human being in the world who guarantees the status of citizen has a right to participate and be given a chance to represent the best. Contrary to this, the constitution of the Gambella peoples' national and regional state in Ethiopia could not entail such concepts. This severely affected the people's involvement and bargaining power in government initiatives and major activities. Therefore, the ultimate objective of this study is to explore and describe the contest between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples' participation in administrative decision-making in the Gambella region of Ethiopia by employing a qualitative and quantitative mixed approach. Our proof finding shows that an experience of exclusion in participation leads to a strained relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous communities in contesting power and resource.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Inclusive Participation, Marginalisation, Local Government, Contestation, and Indigenous

1 Introduction

The right to participate in public affairs is mentioned in international laws. A series of studies also indicated that with the advancement of public administration, local governments expected to involve the community in decision-making process. However, contrary to this, in Ethiopia, rather than participating in advance for the common goods, negative strained relationships developed in the form of contention in decision making between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. That result lack of interest in participating in joint decision and action. It is widely argued that if the community becomes involved inclusively in government decision-making, the government that arises from such a process will be more vibrant. Leaving the community out of decision-making creates tensions. In Gambela region of Ethiopia, in keeping its primary interest, the community's bargaining power at the grassroots level was found at the lowest stage. In such a case, in the Ethiopian context, research on community participation is found in the dearth of literature [1]. Before conducting this study, little was known, less understood and investigated about the topic in the previous empirical literature.

Consequently, the main aim of this study is to explore the inclusiveness of participation between indigenous and non-indigenous people in the Gambella region of Ethiopia and to develop relevant recommendations for the problems observed. It attempted to answer what the natures of community participation in administrative decisions are? And how does the community influence its local government decision-making? Following that, the research considers research methods. Next, the presentation of our results is shown. Last, we discuss the implications of the findings based on the broad literature and theoretical expectations.

1.1 The concept of contestation

The Oxford dictionary defined contest as engagement in 'competition to attain power for supremacy'. Whereas Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "to make the subject of dispute". Wintrobe defined contestation as making a normative claim beyond observing the effects of social phenomena [2]. It implies that the concept of a contest of power in participation has not received standard definitions in the literature. Power is defined as highly diverse, ranging from computing resources to pursuing self-interests to creating the capacity for social cohesion to mobilize resources for collective goals. Ultimately the contention would increase the decision-making power of the competent over the other. Contestation of power could be expressed in academic debates. For example, empowerment versus disempowerment, consensual versus conflictual, power 'over' versus power 'to', constraining versus enabling, Centred versus diffused, quantity versus quality, and power of knowledge versus knowledge without power [3]. From these different concepts, in this study, we used the term empowerment versus disempowerment to connect the contention of participatory power in decision-making ability between indigenous and non-indigenous communities in Ethiopia.

There are tremendous studies on how the government's political arrangement affects indigenous and non-indigenous peoples [4]. Comparative case studies in Africa suggested conflicts created high pressure on indigenous African peoples in different political-administrative periods [5]. While African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) expressed that indigenous people in Africa are those forgotten people exploited by national political and economic structures. Similarly, in well-developed countries such as New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, indigenous people in a range of economic, social and political measures have poorer outcomes than non-indigenous peoples [6].

1.2 The concept of contestation

Participation is an ambiguous concept with different meanings to different people/organizations in different contexts [7]. Participation as a concept differed over processes, effects, goals, agents, and value of participation in decision-making. However, in common usage, it means 'being present. Similarly, acting or participating in a particular activity indicates participation [8]. Contestation defined as a legal or normative practice to object an issue that matters the interest of oneself or a group of people. It encompasses disapproval of norms by involving different social practices. Nevertheless, a theory of contestation emphasizes the concept of contest beyond social norms relating it to the way to obtain liberty and other rights in a particular society [9].

1.3 The concept of contestation

Decision-making is the system by which important action is selected as the solution to a particular problem [10]. However, many scholars argue that decision-making is 'choice-making' and 'problem-solving' [11]. The social development approach assumes that local governments guarantee and promote all residents' well-being, irrespective of whether they are indigenous or non-indigenous people [12]. Consequently, decision-making is the process of selecting the best alternatives by those affected one without any exclusion [13].

Theories relevant to the topic of participation are found in the existing literature. Considering the recommendation from diverse theories, we found that the democratic decision-making theory best suits to guide our study since it presents the necessity of inclusive community participation in local government administrative decision-making [14]. The central idea of democratic decision-making theory assumes that all stakeholders affected by a given decision have the right to participate. Participation can be a pluralist-republican model or direct in the classical democratic sense. In other words, participation can be direct or indirect whenever necessary. It does not prioritize the quality or efficiency of the decision; instead, it prioritizes involvement and control of power [15].

2 Methods

The study used an exploratory and descriptive mixed-method research strategy. This study utilized survey questionnaires, focused group discussions, and semi-structured interviews as the data-gathering methods. The primary data was collected from households in the survey, government officials, and civil groups. At the same time, secondary data was collected from case studies, books, government policies, and proclamations.

To determine the sample size, 442 (from which 12 non-responded and 430 responded), for quantitative research for this study, the formula developed by Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970) was used. The population of Gambella was targeted, and 17625 households from 5 towns were taken as the sample frame from which 442 sample size selected. Simple random, multi-stage and, stratified, & proportionate sampling techniques were used in the quantitative strand. Whereas purposive, snowball and convenience sampling were used to select participants for the interview and focus group discussion. The interview's qualitative data was collected until the saturation level was reached. Five focus group discussions were conducted. The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics with SPSS 16 Version and thematic way, respectively. Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness, including ethical principles considered throughout the study.

3 Findings

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The ability of the respondents to understand the idea under investigation and their potential to engage in decision-making can be determined by understanding the good qualities of the respondents. In relation two this study, gender and ethnicity were taken as the characteristics of the respondents in the household survey.

Table 1. Socioeconomic background of respondents (N = 430)

| Background | Category | N | % |
|------------|----------------|-----|-------|
| Gender | M | 227 | 52.8% |
| | F | 203 | 47.2% |
| Ethnicity | Aguwa | 88 | 20.5% |
| | Nuer | 74 | 17.2% |
| | Majang | 35 | 8.1% |
| | Commo | 11 | 2.6% |
| | Opo | 7 | 1.6% |
| | Non-indigenous | 55 | 12.8% |
| | Not mention | 160 | 37.2% |

Source: Survey data by the authors (2020/21)

The above table reflects those male respondents for 52.8% and females account for 47.2%. Regarding ethnicity, the Gambella region is the home of heterogeneous people. While 50 % of the respondents are indigenous, non-indigenous people account for 12.8%. Whereas those who do not mention rated 37.2%, which is in customary practice added together with the non-indigenous one accounts for 50%.

3.2 Democracy as a characteristic of participation

Intrinsically, participation is a core characteristic of democracy. Local governments expected their community to participate in a democratic decision-making process in which equality and fairness prevail. In this regard, the participants were asked to what extent their local government decision-making process was democratic.

Table 2. Process of democratic Participation

| Levels of Democracy | Frequency | % | Valid % | Cumulative % |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------|---------|--------------|
| Very democratic | 10 | 2.3 | 2.3 | 2.3 |
| Somewhat democratic | 121 | 28.1 | 28.1 | 30.5 |
| Slightly democratic | 48 | 11.2 | 11.2 | 41.6 |
| Somewhat undemocratic | 190 | 44.2 | 44.2 | 85.8 |
| Very undemocratic | 61 | 14.2 | 14.2 | 100.0 |
| Total | 430 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: SPSS analysis and own compilation

The above table showed that 2.3% (N=10) of the respondents give their opinion as their local government decision-making process is very democratic, 28.1 % (N=121) somewhat democratic, 11.2% (N=48) slightly democratic, 44.2% (N=190) somewhat undemocratic, and 14.2% (N=61) very undemocratic.

3.3 Experience of marginalization

When communities participate fairly, the participation process in which the decision is made will be effective. To create equal participation equitably, the local governments expected everybody affected by the decision to involve inclusively. Participants were asked to express their opinions on how the local government administration treated them equally without any background difference.

Table 3. The treatment of local government to create equal participation in the community

| Valid | Frequency | % | Valid % | Cumulative % |
|------------------------|-----------|-------|---------|--------------|
| Equally all times | 6 | 1.4 | 1.4 | 1.4 |
| Somewhat equally | 102 | 23.7 | 23.7 | 25.1 |
| Somewhat unequally | 278 | 64.7 | 64.7 | 89.8 |
| Unequally at all times | 11 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 92.3 |
| DK/CS | 33 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 100.0 |
| Total | 430 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The above table reflected that 1.4% (N=6) of the respondents gave their opinion as equally participated at all times, 23.7% (N=102) somewhat participated equally, 64.7% participated somewhat unequally (N=278), 2.6% (N=11) participated unequally at all times, and 7.7% (N=33) of the respondents do not want to give their opinion.

4 Discussion

Table 1 shows that about 450 samples were planned, of which 430 participated in the study, making the response rate 95.5%. Most respondents are male (52.8%, N=227) and female (47.2%, N=203). The slight difference indicates men are more culturally supported to forward their opinion than women. Women's household workload and other social responsibilities make them retreat from decision-making processes to their local concerns. Comparatively, though, indigenous and non-indigenous women's participation is lowest, with 62% of non-indigenous found excluded from the decision-making process. The division of women among their ethnic group line leads them to be subjugated by local administrators to be excluded from the major decision arena. Most of the participants in the interview and focus group discussion exclaimed that their local administrators are not transparent enough to encourage women across key decisions. The finding is against the democratic decision-making theory that stipulates that those affected by the decision must be involved.

Some of the most kinds of democracy are in which the people can participate in voting, through which the people can elect their representatives. In the study area, non-indigenous people are not well represented in the local council. In such a way, as table two indicated, decisions made by local governments are not a democracy. Grounded on the literature, the result is also reflected in the study conducted by Kena [16]. The researcher concludes that the communities at a sub-local level in Ethiopia are not fully participating in the decision-making process of their locality due to insufficient democracy in terms of accountability and transparency.

Table three illustrates that people in Gambella region mostly treated unequally. The analysis based on the interview and focus group discussion indicated that an experience of marginalization could be deliberate supported by law or non-deliberate supported by customary practices. For instance, in deliberate forms, in terms of political representation in the policy formulation process, the indigenous community is over-empowered by the regional constitution. In contrast, the non-indigenous community has been given less recognition by law. Regarding economic representation, the opposite is true. Through the pretext of federal investment law, the non-indigenous people have grabbed the land more than the indigenous people. This land grabbing gave rise to non-indigenous ones controlling big restaurants, merchandise, and import

and export economic activities; hence, the law has given them a chance to get loans from development banks by granting the possessed land. Such economic domination created the feeling of alienation by the indigenous, who, in the long run, have developed stereotypes such as 'we' and 'they' during the decision-making process.

Conversely, the experience of marginalization in participation was observed non-deliberately. Even if all communities in the Gambella region are Ethiopian nationals through birth, because of societal labelling, the community is broadly divided into: 'Habesha' or 'Degegna' for non-indigenous/those who are supposedly coming from other parts of Ethiopia and residing in the region. 'Nebar' for that indigenous people who have lived in the region for a long time. Such labelling creates a gap in equal participation in the decision-making process.

The finding shows that in terms of prioritizing the interests of their community during council decisions, representatives were found less credible. From participants in the survey, interview, focus group and observations, we can infer that the community needs and issues should be brought to light by their representatives. This needs skills and knowledge to make essential choices on time, to whom to deal with, who gets to choose and how, and how to define how to address issues identified at most or prepare an eventual action plan. Thus, all these necessary elements to prioritize community issues seem to lack for local governments. The assumption of effective participation that allows communities to choose goals is minimal. This result is in line with the findings of Morris [17]. Morris concluded that ethnic conflicts between indigenous and non-indigenous communities resulted from a lack of equality in terms of resources and political power. It implies that the contest of participatory power between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples created non-authentic participation in political and economic dynamics in Ethiopia.

5 Conclusion

In multi-ethnic society like Ethiopia, equal participation in political power and resource distribution is very important to avoid unfair contestation, civil unrest and conflict. Nevertheless, in the study area, there is an unequal contest of participation between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Contestation, in terms of marginalization of participation could be expressed differently for each community. From an economic perspective, the indigenous community feels "we are not empowered economically, and others control the resources". In terms of political perspective, the non-indigenous people blamed the local government's inability to give them political power and are raising the question of representatives and equal participation. Consequently, the regional constitution gave rise to unfair contestation among people. The community's bargaining power by exerting its influence to keep its primary interest through collective action/joint decisions was very low. The strained relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is more conflictual than cooperative and harmonious. Generally, participation in decision-making in the Gambella region was found to be low, non-inclusive and full of contest. Overall, the researcher has limitations in this study. The term "contest of participatory power" is a broad concept that includes all forms of participation and bargaining power in decision-making. Thus, our generalisability is not robust enough to show the whole process of contestation of power during participation, and to this end, further research needs to be conducted.

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