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## **CHALLENGES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN TIGRAY NATIONAL REGIONAL STATE: ISSUES OF EMPOWERMENT AND LOCAL AUTONOMY**

Gebreselassie Sebhatleab Faculty at the department of civics, CSSH, Adigrat University, Tigray, Ethiopia. [biniamgere15@gmail.com](mailto:biniamgere15@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*The need for autonomous and well-equipped local government has been associated with the issues of promoting good governance, building democracy, fostering development and effective service delivery. Autonomous local government can only be ensured when officials are democratically elected and accountable to the electorate. Besides, local governments should also be empowered with sufficient human and material resources to function properly. Nonetheless, in most developing countries like Ethiopia are suffering from lack of local autonomy and empowerment. This article argues that local governments in Tigray National Regional State are poorly empowered and have limited autonomy to exercise their legal powers, instead, they are used as agents of implementation. Secondary data were collected from different sources (books, journals, research works and internet) about district level local government. Moreover, primary sources were collected from key informants and FGD discussants. The findings of the article revealed that despite the fact that district level local governments are independent to exercise their legal power on matters pertaining to their locality under the new federal arrangement in Ethiopia, however, practically, they are less autonomous and poorly empowered to exercise their constitutionally given power. Instead, they are highly dictated through the chain of command of the central/regional governments which limits their discretionary power. The study also found that district level local governments are poorly equipped with financial and qualified human manpower to deliver public services effectively and efficiently to the local community. Furthermore, there is lack of accountability of officials to the local community but they are highly affiliated by the ruling party and accountable to it. Therefore, the study recommends that promoting good governance, building democracy, fostering development and effective service delivery can only be achieved through ensuring local autonomous, empowered & accountability of officials to the local community.*

**Key terms:** local government, empowerment, autonomy, good governance, local development, service delivery and local democracy.

### **1.1.Introduction**

District level local governments play a very significant role in the life of the local community. It is an integral part of the democratic process, good governance, local development activities and

quality service delivery. Due to their closeness to the local community, local governments are more responsible and have vital effect on the day-to-day lives of the local people. In democratic states, the local council are democratically elected by the local people and are expected to fulfill the best interest of the people. District level local governments are also crucial to develop democratic culture fosters the quality-of-service provision, poverty alleviation and enabling development.

However, most developing countries including Ethiopia give much emphasis to theoretical arrangement of local governments than the operational and practical matters. As a result, local governments are poorly authorized to exercise their powers independently of the central governments. This review, therefore, argues that local governments in Tigray National Regional State are less autonomous, poorly empowered politically, financially and administratively.

This article mainly employed secondary data sources but primary data were also collected from sector offices of Ganta-afeshum woreda to supplement the secondary sources. The secondary data were collected from various sources such as federal/ regional constitutions and other laws describing the status of local government in Ethiopia and other states. Moreover, various books, journals articles, policy documents, reports and websites have been used. The study finds that (1) district level local governments have little autonomy because they are highly dictated by regional and zonal authorities, (2) the revenue and public spending of district level local governments are very limited which results in an inconsistency of constitutional mandate and their actual performance, and (3) district level local governments are poorly staffed with material and human resources because they have limited financial resources to improve staff composition. This in turn, affects the quality and quantity of the public services provisions. Therefore, the article concludes that district level local governments have been poorly empowered with limited autonomy though the devolution of power theoretically described in the constitution and other laws to be independent decision makers on matters of their respective locality.

## **1.2. Background and Justification of the Study**

The devolution of power in the modern history of Ethiopian has been traced back to the post 1991 where powers and functions between the federal and regional governments are clearly stipulated under Art.51 and 52 in the FDRE constitution respectively.<sup>1</sup> Federalism in Ethiopia has created nine ethnic-based regional states and two autonomous city administrations.<sup>2</sup> All the regions are given a considerable degree of internal self-rule, including the authority to raise local revenue and administer their own budgets and development plans.<sup>3</sup> Each region has a number of Zonal, Wereda and Tabia tiers of administration to which it must transfer responsibilities and resources to promote decentralized governance at all levels of government.<sup>4</sup> The main objectives of Ethiopia's decentralization policy are to enable the different ethnic groups to develop their culture and language, manage socio-economic development in their respective areas, exercise self-rule and bring about an equitable share of national resources among the regions. Lately, it has become increasingly evident that the shortages of trained personnel and inadequate institutional and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's (FDRE) constitution Article 51 and 52.*

<sup>2</sup> *The FDRE constitution Article 47.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid: Article 47*

<sup>4</sup> *Tegegn, G.(2007).*

administrative capacity have hampered efforts to institutionalize decentralized governance in Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup>

The 1995 Constitution of Tigray National Regional State stipulates the powers and responsibilities of the Regional, Zonal, Woreda and Tabia levels of administrations where woreda local government was particularly empowered to foster development activities.<sup>6</sup> However, in reality, there has been very little devolution of power to the woreda levels of administration. As a result, woreda local governments have very limited decision-making authority since they are under the guidance and supervision of Zonal Administration.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the pattern of decentralization in Tigray National Regional State is characterized by top-down as the chain of command flows from the Regional government via zonal and woreda to Tabia local governments. This situation greatly affects the self-governing decision-making power at district level. Formally, the woreda local government has been given power to exercise complete decision-making authority.<sup>8</sup> However, in practice, their decision-making power of the woreda local governments is controlled by Zonal administration. This reduces the autonomy and independence of local governments in the region and such chain of command curtailed the discretionary powers and decision-making authority of the woreda local governments on the region. The key research questions of this article include: (1) what are the legal powers and responsibilities of district level local government as per the FDRE constitution and other laws of the land? (2) Do the district/woreda level local governments practically exercise their legal mandate on matters pertaining their locality? (3) What are the predicaments of exercising the powers of local government in Tigray National Regional State? (4) Are there ways of improving where local government can exercise their legal power in their locality?

### **1.3.The Objective of the Article**

The overall objective of this article was to shed light on the issues of empowerment and local autonomy in Tigray National Regional State. This specific objective of this article is: (1) to describe the legal powers and responsibilities of district level local government as per the FDRE constitution and other laws of the land. (2) To examine whether the district/woreda level local governments practically exercise their legal mandate on matters pertaining their locality. (3) To investigate the predicaments of exercising the powers of local government in Tigray National Regional State. (4) To look for ways of improving where local governments can exercise their power in their locality.

### **1.4.Methodology of the Article**

This article depends mainly on secondary data but supplemented by primary data. Secondary data were collected and reviewed from books, journals, constitutions and various related literature to local government autonomy and empowerment. Whereas, primary data were collected from respective authorities of the Woreda, namely, woreda council, executive committee and judiciary branches whether they are sufficiently empowered and autonomous or not; if they are freely performing their legally mandate or not; if they are financially independent in levying and collecting taxes or not; if they are equipped with human and material resources and the like. Hence,

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<sup>5</sup> Mehret, A.(1998).

<sup>6</sup> The constituon of Tgray Natonal Regional State1995.

<sup>7</sup> Art.69 (4) of the constituon of Tgray Natonal Regional State1995.

<sup>8</sup> Art.74 and 76 of the Tigray constitution, 1995.

primary data were collected using face-to-face interview from sector bureau head offices of the woreda.

### **1.5. Description of Study Area**

Ganta Afeshum woreda is one of the woredas in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia. Part of the Misraqawi Zone, Ganta Afeshum is bordered on the south by Hawzen, on the west by the Mehakelegnaw (Central) Zone, on the north by Gulomahda, and on the east by Saesi Tsaedaemba. Based on the 2007 national census conducted by the Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia (CSA), this woreda has a total population of 88,644, 4.10% are urban inhabitants. With an area of 1,636.36 square kilometers. Concerning the political structure, Ganta Afeshum woreda is composed of 35 Tabias and its head office is Adigrat town.

## **2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of Local Government**

The term local government has been defined in different ways, depending on the orientation and experience of its users. For instance, Ahmed, J., et al (2005) describe local government as “a political authority established by a state as a subsidiary authority for the purpose of decentralizing political power”. Azfar, *et. al.*, (2005) also define local government as “the act of decentralizing power, which may take different forms of decentralizations such as deconcentration, devolution and the like. Deconcentration involves delegation of authority to field units of the same department and devolution on the other hand refers to a transfer of authority to local government units.

According to Emezi (1984), local governments are explained as systems of local administration under local communities that are organized to maintain law and order, provide some limited range of social services, and encourage cooperation and participation of inhabitants towards the improvement of their conditions of living. They provide the community with formal organizational framework which enables them to conduct their affairs effectively. Whallen (1976) views local governments as a given territory and population, an institutional structure for legislative, executive or administrative purposes; a separate legal identity, a range of powers and functions authorized by delegation from the appropriate central or intermediate legislative and within the realm of such delegation, autonomy including fiscal autonomy.

According to Ola (1984), there are three major schools of thought with emphasizes on the functional responsibilities of local governments. These include (1) Democratic Participatory School of thought, (2) The Efficient-Service School of thought, and (3) The Developmental School of thought. Basically, the democratic school of thought holds that local government function to bring about democracy and to afford opportunities for political participation to the citizen as well as to educate and socialize him politically. The efficiency school of thought, on the other hand, argued that what is central and important to local government is not the bringing about of democracy, instead, local government must be judged by its success in providing quality services to the public. The developmental school of thought also defer from the above two schools of thought because it emphasized on how local government in the developing world can be an effective agent of a better life, an improved means of living, socially and economically, and a means to a better share in the national wealth.

To put in net shell, the above approaches can be classified in to two categories. These are (1) the general and (2) the developmental category. The major functional items in the general category include: democratic-participatory and the efficiency-schools: democratic ideals, political participation, protective services and infrastructural services. Under the developmental category include: National integration, social and economic development, and manpower resources development. Arising from this definition, the government itself states the primary objectives of the local government as follows:

- (a) To make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representatives' body;
- (b) To facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government close to the local government levels of our society, and to encourage initiatives and leadership potential;
- (c) To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development;
- (d) To provide a two-way channel of communication between local communities and government (both state and federal).

### **2.1. The Essence of Autonomy of Local Government**

Indeed, the conceptions towards local government autonomy are not identical. Hence, there are misinterpretations as to what the term 'autonomy' connotes, despite its regular usage. For instance, Odunfa (1991) describes the term local government autonomy as local self-government which promotes grassroots democracy. Grass root democracy is primarily aimed at giving the vast majority of the people the fullest opportunity to participate in determining their own destiny. Despite the fact that the essence of local government autonomy, in most less developed countries, it is obvious that neither local authorities nor the local communities cannot have complete autonomy or complete local self-government within their respective locality.

Another scholar, Nwabueze (1983) defines the autonomy under a federal system to mean that each government enjoys a separate existence and independence from the control of the other governments. It is an autonomy which requires not just the legal and physical existence of an apparatus of government like a legislative assembly, governor, court etc. but that each government must exist not as an appendage of another government but as autonomous entity in the sense of being able to exercise its own will in the conduct of its affairs free from direction of another government. Therefore, for him autonomy would only be meaningful in a situation whereby each level of government is not constitutionally bound to accept dictation or directive from another. But local government autonomy refers to the discretion which local governments enjoy in regulating their own affair. The extent to which local governments are free from the control of the center and federal government in the management of local affairs.

Davey (1991) also points out that Local autonomy is primary concerned with the question of responsibilities, resources and discretion conferred on the local authorities. As such discretion and responsibility are at the core of local government. It presumes that local government must possess the power to take decisions independent of external control within the limits laid down by the law. It must acquire efficient resources particularly of finance to meet their responsibilities, put differently; local autonomy is the freedom of independence in clearly defined issue, areas, as well as separate legal identity from other levels of government.

In view of the above argument, I can argue that local governments in Ethiopia have never been and are less autonomous to undertake their functions effectively and efficiently. In essence, when one talks of local government autonomy in Ethiopia, in written, local governments autonomous and independent to make political decisions pertaining their local matters whereas practically, they are dictated by both the state and federal governments.

## **2.2. Decentralization and the Power of Local Governments**

Decentralization is a process whereby political authority and capacity is devolved from the central to regional and local levels. Decentralization could also be expected to contribute to key elements of good governance, such as increasing people's opportunities for participation in economic, social and political decisions; assisting in developing people's capacities; and enhancing government responsiveness, transparency and accountability at local levels (UNDP, 1997). Decentralization also promotes improved planning, budgeting and management techniques and practices; the adoption of new tools; and the development of improved human resources to operate the decentralized program (Ibid). Decentralization can be mainly classified in to three. These include: administrative, financial and political decentralization.

### **Administrative decentralization**

Administrative decentralization refers to the transfer of responsibility for planning, management, and the rising and allocation of resources from the central government to local governments. It has three major forms (deconcentration, delegation, and devolution) each with different characteristics. *Deconcentration* refers to the redistribution of decision-making authority and financial and management responsibilities among different levels of the central government, which is often considered the weakest form of decentralization and is used most frequently in unitary states. *Delegation* refers to a more extensive form of decentralization. Through delegation, central government can transfer responsibility for decision making and administration of public functions along with upward accountability.

*Devolution* also refers to the transfer of authority for decision making, finance, and management to local government. In a devolved system, local governments have clear and legally recognized geographical boundaries over which they exercise authority and within which they perform public functions.

### **Financial decentralization**

Financial decentralization refers to the establishment of effective and transparent financial management. The basic characteristics of a system for decentralized financial management should include transparency of allocation, predictability of the amounts available to local institutions and local autonomy of decision making on resource utilization.<sup>9</sup>

### **Political decentralization**

Political decentralization refers to the transfer of political authority to the local government through the establishment of elected local governments. It defines electoral rules and norms of interaction among elected local authorities and local executives and administrators including the

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<sup>9</sup> (UNDP, 1996).

degree of oversight of the elected officials over local executive.<sup>10</sup> Political decentralization lies at the heart of the local governance system as it provides the local government the ability to effectively represent the preferences of the local population. Citizens manifest their preferences by selecting candidates closest to their preferences and political decentralization allows the elected candidates to reflect these preferences in the decision making processes. Political decentralization also allows the citizens to directly participate in decision-making through various instruments. There are two main components of political decentralization system: a) discretion allowed to the local government to perform fundamental functions that allow them to represent the preferences of the citizens in decision making process and b) mechanisms that hold the local government accountable for appropriate use of this discretion.

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### **2.3.The Rationale for Empowering Local Governments**

Empowering local governments implies the process of transferring of significant amounts of power or authority, functions and capacity from the central government to the local institutions to ensure efficient and effective local decision making based on local knowledge. Empowering local governments also aims at promoting high level community participation, democratic governance and maximum accountability of decision-making.<sup>11</sup>

Development policy makers argue that empowering local governments has been motivated by the demands for more local voice in decision making. Moreover, it has a great significance of ensuring maximum coordination among various agencies involved in planning and implementation of development programs at the local level. Empowering local governments is also advocated as a means of improving the management of development by enhancing the governance of development, increasing flexibility and responsiveness. In addition, empowering local governments is viewed as a way of making maximum use of both local, natural and human resources in a sustainable way to ensure rapid development of local areas.<sup>12</sup>

There is, therefore, always a connection between empowering local governments with local resource mobilization and utilization, and national development, democracy and good governance. This is because it is the local people who have an in-depth knowledge about the resource base and will thus be able to utilize them to the maximum benefit of the local area in particular and the nation as a whole. The first economic rationale of empowering local governments is that decisions about public expenditure that are made by a level of government that is closer and more responsive to a local constituency are more likely to reflect the demand for local services than decisions made by a remote central government.<sup>13</sup> The second economic rationale for local government autonomy is to improve the competitiveness of governments and enhance innovation and hence the likelihood that governments will act to satisfy the wishes of citizens. The third reason why local institutions should be equipped necessary power and recourses is that people are more willing to pay for services that respond to their priorities, especially if they have been involved in the decision making process for the delivery of these services<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> (Lankina, 2008; Keating, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> (Tsegaye, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> (Kwasi, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> (Litvack and Seddon, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> (Olowu, 2004).

### 3. A Brief Overview of Local Government Practices Prior to 1930

Historically, Ethiopia was divided states until the second half of the nineteenth century. Some authors argue that the country's division was characterized by tension between local lords and a central the central authority. Local governments were sometimes attained even more prominence than the central government. As a result, local authorities had great significance in Ethiopia at the time.<sup>15</sup>

Emperor Tewodros initiated the process centralization once he assumed power in 1855 by defeating the local lords and a gradual centralization of power had begun. Following the death of Tewodros II, Teklegiorigis (Wagshum gobezie of Lasta) had assumed power in 1968 and three years after, he was defeated by Bezbe Kassa at the battle of Asseb in 1971. Finally, Bezbe Kassa was crowned as Yohannes IV, King of Kings of Ethiopia. Yohannes IV was known for his allowing local lords to rule their locality. For instance, in Showa Minilik II, in Gojjam king Teklehymanot and the like.<sup>16</sup> However, these two emperors were unable to establish a strong centralized rule despite their ambition due to lack of technological, poor economy, the landscape the country and an entrenched culture and others.<sup>17</sup>

Following the death of Yohannes IV at the battle of Metema in 1889, Minilik II declared himself as king of kings of Ethiopia. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> half the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the country had become a highly centralized unitary state.<sup>18</sup> Emperor Minilik began the process of territorial expansion even before assuming power using military coercion to expand his empire towards East, south east, south, south east, and west parts directions of the county and introduced militaristic administration known Neftegna system. He established settlement sites and military garrisons by the Amhara settlers included soldiers, administrators and priests<sup>19</sup>. The system suppressed any resistance against the Emperor and maintains order for smooth flow of tribute to the imperial treasury. Thus, directly or indirectly, local authorities have been highly influenced by central government.<sup>20</sup>

The centrally appointed regional and local authorities were given the title of Balabbats to administer the local people. A Balabbat was a district administrator who was appointed served as bridge between the central government and the local society.<sup>21</sup> The main functions of a Balabbat were to maintain security, assist the regional and local governors in collecting taxes and tributes, and mobilize the local people when their services were needed by the central government. They even assisted Minilik's land expropriation program in which he seized 2/3 of the lands in the region. In return, Balabat had their lands spared from expropriation<sup>22</sup>.

#### 3.1. Local Governments during the Imperial Regime (1930-1974)

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<sup>15</sup> (Gebru, 1991 and Teshale, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> (Gebru, 1991, Teshale, 2002, Bahru Zewde, 2002)

<sup>17</sup> (Gebru, 1991)

<sup>18</sup> (Bahru, Z., 2002)

<sup>19</sup> (Teshale, 2002)

<sup>19</sup> (Markakis, 1975).

<sup>21</sup>(Abbink, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> (Markakis, 1975)



In 1930, Emperor Haile Selassie assumed power and a year after, in 1931, he promulgated the first written constitution in which the Emperor legally controlled the local lords and to some extent curtailed their traditional privileges<sup>23</sup>. The Emperor also took the most drastic formal measure of centralization in 1942 when he launched provincial and local administrative reforms<sup>24</sup>. It was declared that the reform was meant to modernize and standardize provincial and local administrations. Yet, the ultimate motive of this reform was to centralize powers<sup>25</sup>. He also centralized the appointment of provincial and local administrators in his own person (Article 3 of Decree 1/1942). Provincial and local administrators were not only appointed by the Emperor but were also required to act as his agents<sup>26</sup>. The main functions of provincial and local administrators were agents of the central government such as maintaining law and order, collecting taxes and the like. ~~During the Imperial regime, no representative institutions existed at local level. In fact, in~~ some of the cities and towns, elected municipal councils were established; however, the process of election was based on property qualification<sup>27</sup>.

After 44 years of Monarchical rule, the Imperial Regime was toppled down in 1974 by the military officers known as Derg and adopted the socialist ideological orientation along with Marxism-Leninism<sup>28</sup>. No sooner, the Derg nationalized all rural and urban land and extra urban houses. It established two local level institutions, namely, the Urban Dwellers' Associations (UDAs) and the Peasant Associations (PAs). These associations were established at local levels<sup>29</sup>.

The purpose of establishing these institutions was to organize urban dwellers and peasants so that they could run their own affairs, solve their own problems and directly participate in political, economic and social activities. Hence, they were formally provided with significant developmental mandates including building roads, markets, low cost houses, schools and the like<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, UDAs and PAs were granted vital powers and responsibilities to be able to undertake their development activities (Andargachew, T., 1994). At the beginning, the associations had registered considerable achievements in terms of service delivery such as combating illiteracy which reduced by half, expanding access to health services and education, providing basic necessities to the public and the like (Gilkes, D., 1979).

Nevertheless, all the above good aspects were transitory and the two local associations were converted into instruments of repression. Such a situation reached its pinnacle when they involved in the horrible act known as Red Terror. It was an operation through which the Derg used to eliminate its political opponents through mass killings (Bahru, Z., 2008, Andargachew, T., 1994). Later on, the UDAs and PAs were commonly referred to as revolutionary guards. They were given the duties of ordinary police forces at local level but they were instruments of suppressing political opponents of the Derg's (Andargachew (1994). The suspected members of the EPRP were mainly targeted by the revolutionary squads and hunted down, tortured and killed. In the process hundreds

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<sup>23</sup> (Abera, 2000)

<sup>24</sup> (Decree No 1/1942).

<sup>25</sup> (Teshale, 2002)

<sup>26</sup> (Article 2 of Decree 1/1942)

<sup>27</sup> (Cohen 1980; Clapham, 1988)

<sup>28</sup> (Keller E., 1981)

<sup>29</sup> (Proclamation 47/1975).

<sup>30</sup> (Proclamation No 31/1975)

of thousands, most of them women and educated people, were ruthlessly murdered (Bahru, Z.2008).

Taddesse (2007) added that the UDAs and PAs had the duty of recruiting the young Ethiopians forcefully to the war front against the insurgents in the northern part of Ethiopia. Accordingly, each PA and UDA was required to conscript a certain number of young people for the military purpose within limited period. In order to fulfill their specified quota, members of the PA and UDA engaged in search of young Ethiopians day and night.

### **3.2. Local Governments in the Post Derg Regime**

After seventeen years awful civil war, the military regime was collapsed when EPRDF took control of Addis Ababa on 28 May 1991. No longer, the EPRDF summoned The Peaceful and Democratic Transitional Conference of Ethiopia (Kinfe, A., 1994). In the Conference, all opposition parties, religious representatives, foreign dignitaries and other representatives were invited. Finally, the Conference adopted the Charter Transitional period. The Charter recognized the right to self-determination of each nation, nationality and people. Besides, the Charter also authorized each nation, nationality and people to establish self-government starting from woreda (district) level local government (Proclamation No 1/1991). Hence, the Chapter was the first legal framework which laid a foundation for decentralization process in the Ethiopia and this was termed as the first phase of decentralization.

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia constitution was ratified on December 8, 1994 and put in to effect on August 21, 1995. The constitution introduced an ethnic-based federal system in Ethiopia (Assefa, 2007). Article 39(3) of the FDRE constitution stipulates the establishment of autonomous sub-regional territorial units to accommodate intra-regional ethnic minorities. Moreover, article 50(4) of the Constitution prescribes to the regional states how to establish and adequately empower local government (FDRE constitution, 1995).

The second phase of decentralization began after a Sustainable Poverty Reduction and Development Policy (SPRDP) was adopted by the federal government in 2001. Decentralization was chosen as a key mechanism for the implementation of this policy (SPRDP, 2002). At the center of the SPRDP, rural districts and city/town administrations have been authorized to exercise a certain measure of political, administrative and financial powers. After the adoption of SPRDP, the regional states amended their constitutions to empower local governments. Moreover, the regional states also enacted statutes to restructure their urban local governance system in line with the SPRDP.

### **3.3. The Current Decentralization and Local Government practices in Ethiopia**

This paper argues that the current local governments are not genuinely and adequately empowered though the government has been voicing about the implementation of decentralization. Indeed, many research findings of politicians and development policy makers have revealed that decentralization is necessary to empower local communities to be responsible for their development (Kwasi, A.2005) Besides, decentralization is directly and indirectly associated with many aspects of good governance, including consensual decision-making, equity, representation, accountability and responsiveness of public institutions to local community. As a result, many

states have embraced the policy of decentralization as a means of advancing participatory development and good governance which is closest to the local people (Litvack et al., 1998). Theoretically, decentralization has become an essential political agenda to provide opportunities for people at the local level to be involved in determining their economic and political choices (Mihret, 2007).

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the constitutional and other legal frameworks towards implementing decentralization and empower local governments to be self-sufficient, the reality portrays that they are not genuinely and adequately empowered to function as independent entities at local levels. That is, on paper, local governments are autonomous to formulate policies, enact laws and decide on their own local matters but practically, local governments have still been considered as agents and their function is confined to implement the centrally adopted laws, policies and strategies (Mihret, 2007). Moreover, many research studies revealed that zonal administrations supervise the work of all wereda governments. Politicians and administrators at the zonal level are appointed by regional governments and are accountable to them rather than to the people. Governance practices of the wereda local governments are also dictated by the non-elected zonal administrations. Accordingly, the current decentralization process in Ethiopia has brought little devolution of decision-making power and responsibility to the lower tier of governments. Hence, local governments are not autonomous to make political decisions concerning their own local matters unless allowed to do so. This situation also creates the problem of accountability whereby the elected and appointed officials are not accountable to the community but to the ruling party (Tegegn, 2007, Fenta, 1998, Mihret, 2007).

Currently, regional states have established woredas in rural areas and city administrations in urban areas. There is a representative council in each woreda and city administration whose members are directly elected by the local people. There is also an executive council which is chaired by politically appointed chief administrator of the woreda and a mayor for city administrations. The politically appointed chief administrator of the rural woreda has very great influence in the politics of woreda local government (Abraham, G. 2010). Besides; various sector offices have been established to deal with the bureaucratic works of woredas and city administrations. The regional constitutions and the city proclamations authorize the woredas and city administrations to decide on matters relating to their own social services and economic development adopt their own budgets and hire and fire their administrative personnel. Nonetheless, there are a number of drawbacks in the current of decentralization as it fails to empower and make autonomous for lower level local governments (ibid).

#### **4. Decentralization in Tigray National Regional State**

Art.45 (1 and 2) of the Tigray National Regional State stipulates that the regional state of Tigray is structured in to Zonal, Woreda and Tabaia tiers and the council of the state of this region shall be entitled to restructure other administrative organizations and limit their powers. Hence, the Tigray National Regional State is composed of 35 rural woredas, 12 urban woredas and seven zonal administrations. The regional government, woreda and Tabia local governments shall have legislative, executive and judiciary powers (Art.46, Art.73 and Art.83). Each tier of government has its own powers and functions which are clearly stipulated in the constitution. Particularly, the woreda local governments are given considerable powers and functions since they are considered as center of development activities. They are given internal self-rule including the authority to

raise local revenue and administer their own budgets and development plans (Art.76). Nevertheless, practically they dictated and controlled by the Zonal administrative bodies.

#### **4.1. Issues of Empowerment and Autonomy**

As it stated previously, Ethiopia had been under centralized political system till the demise of the Imperial regime in 1974. However, in the post 1991, the country adopted ethnic based federalism along with decentralized governance where local governments have been legally granted with powers to self-determination (FDRE constitution, Art.39) and independent decision making authority pertaining their local matters (proc.2001).

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Woreda local governments are multi-purpose entities in the current federal structure of the Ethiopian State. Legally, local governments are considered as autonomous self-governing units. They have their own elected council, executive committee, judiciary and administrative structures at local levels. They are also entitled to prepare and approve their own budget, implement economic and social development projects, set up and manage public services and exercise democratic decision making at the local level. The above indicators signify devolution of power, including local autonomy, decision-making and responsibilities. However, practically, local governments are poorly empowered and have very little autonomy unlike to what they are legally entitled in the constitution and other laws. Majority of literature indicate that there are many drawbacks why the current local governments in Ethiopia are poorly empowered and have very little autonomy.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this study is to assess whether woreda local governments are fully empowered and autonomous to be able to decide on matters pertaining their local affairs or not. The study was focused on woreda Ganta-afeshum, eastern zone of Tigray region. The existing governance and administrative structures are also reviewed for the purpose of assessing the institutional and organizational capacity of the wereda for effective self-government. A review of the legal status, functions and responsibilities of the wereda level of government is presented below.

#### **4.2.Powers and Duties of Wereda**

It is obvious that wereda local government is a multi-purpose local government unit in the current state structure in Ethiopia. In fact not mentioned in the federal constitution, in most regional constitutions, it has been given elaborate powers and responsibilities. The woreda local government has also an elected council, executive committee and administrative structure. In written, the woreda local government can prepare and approve its own budget, prepare and implement economic and social development projects, set up and manage public services and exercise decision making at the local level. Nevertheless, the extent to which these powers and responsibilities are exercised in practice since all these require autonomy and to what extent woreda local governments are equipped with necessary resources (financial and human resources). The following discussion is intended to provide answers to these and related questions.

#### **4.3. The Political Structure and Practices of Wereda Ganta-afeshum**

Wereda Gantaafeshum is found in Eastern administrative zone of Tigray Region. There is an elected council that acts as a legislative body and its membership size of 195. Out of the total

council membership, fourteen constitute the executive committee whose function is to oversee the daily administration activities of the wereda. 25% of the members of the council are women. The executive committee and the general council serve for a simultaneous term of five years. All council and executive committee are members of TPLF.

Constitutionally, the wereda has extensive formal powers and responsibilities. It is responsible for running all socio-economic development in the area including agriculture, health, education and infrastructure development. In practice, however, it is subjected to the control and supervision of the zonal administration and the regional government in matters ranging from budget preparation and approval to undertaking socio-economic development projects. For example, building schools and clinics.

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As per the interview of the chairman of the wereda council, though the wereda could prepare its own budget but this had to be submitted to the zonal administration for approval. It cannot implement the budget without securing formal approval from the zone and the regional government because it receives its budget appropriation from this higher authority in the form of transfers. Such restriction resulted in the wereda does not have full autonomy and independence in its affairs.

Powers and responsibilities of the wereda are also limited in many other ways. For example, it does not have the authority to introduce taxes and impose new tariffs without the approval of the zonal administration. Its spending authority is limited to some amounts of money and all expenditures above this figure must be authorized by the zone. In addition, all economic and social plans have to be submitted to the zonal administration and instructions for their implementation have to come from Zonal office.

Another way of controlling the wereda by zonal administration is the practice of evaluation. According to some wereda officials, evaluation is used to assess the performance of the elected council and ensure its accountability and responsiveness to the electorate. It is an essential practice intended to investigate allegations of corruption and abuse of authority by elected officials.

## **5. The Major Challenges of the Woreda**

From the above discussion, it can be observed that the wereda tier of government does not have complete autonomy and decision-making authority. It wereda local governments are well equipped with financial and human resources to exercise effective self-government. There are fundamental constraining factors which can hinder the autonomy of wereda local government.

### **5.1.Shortcomings related to legal documents**

Article 51 and 52 of the FDRE constitution stipulates the powers and duties of the Federal and Regional States but the powers and duties of wereda local governments are not clearly stipulated in the Federal Constitution. As we all know, wereda local governments and city administrations perform important functions relating to daily life of the local people but these functions are being performed as per the command of regional officials through political decisions (Berhanu, L.2009). Moreover, most regional constitutions state that wereda and city administrations have been given the power to plan and implement its own social services and economic development. Nevertheless, they lack clarity as to which social service and economic matters are within the jurisdiction of weredas local governments (Zemelak, A.2011). Most regional constitutions and statutes consider

local governments as subordinate structures of the regional states rather than autonomous governments. The chief administrators of the woredas and mayors of city administrations are appointed by the regional government. It is evident that this has created poor system of accountability whereby the appointed chief administrator and city mayor are not accountable to the locally elected official and the people. In a system where there is poor system accountability, the role of the local councils to oversee the performance of the local executive bodies is weak and insignificant (Yilmaz S & Venugopal V, 2008).

### **5.2.Financial dependence of woreda Ganta-afeshum**

The financial empowerment of local governments is a critical factor affecting their autonomy and effectiveness in addressing the problems of their locality. Indeed, most woreda local governments in the country are dependent on both central and regional governments for budget subsidies. Several research findings (Zemelak, A.2011, Fenta, 1998) revealed that most local government in Ethiopia could cover not more than forty percent of the budgetary expenditures from revenues they collected from their woreda.

As per the data collected from the study area; wereda Ganta-afeshum is dependent on the grant of regional government because it couldn't generate ample revenue from local sources. The tax base of woreda is also very narrow because most of the revenue sources are land taxation and very few service rendering activities. Hence, majority of the annual budget of woreda comes from the regional government in the form of transfers.

Moreover, the power to levy and decide the rate of taxation is vested in hand of the regional government. As a result, the taxation power of the woreda is confined to collect revenue for selected areas such as personal income from employees and small traders, rural land use fee and agricultural income tax. The power to decide on the revenue sources of local governments is vested in the regional government. Thus, the woreda doesn't have full financial power to be autonomous and independent of in its jurisdiction.

### **5.3.Shortage of skilled man power in the woreda**

Even though the woreda has been recruiting degree holders recently, but still the skills and expertise in the areas of basic management, project management, budgeting and fiancé, human resources management and service delivery are still unfulfilled. At present, most wereda administrations are first degree holders and don't have practical experience in local government administration. Equally important, most wereda government staff is far from familiar with the concept of public service of government responsiveness to the needs and concerns of the citizenry. Such inadequate staff capacity and lack of awareness about the potential role of autonomous local government in promoting sustainable development at the local level.

### **5.4.Lack of awareness of the personnel**

Most of the administrators of the woreda and councilors see their roles as representatives of the regional government, zonal and the ruling party. As such, carrying out government and party orders takes precedence over community concerns and needs. This is perfectly understandable given the fact that the majority of wereda-level personnel got their jobs in the first place primarily because they are either members or sympathizers of the ruling party. However, this does not help

at all the evolution of an independent local government system that is responsive to the people at the local level. In conjunction with the serious problem of heavy financial dependence of the wereda on the regional government, government/party dominance of local government can only reinforce upward accountability. Given this situation, it will be a long road before a democratic wereda self-government that is responsive to the needs and concerns of the community emerges in Ethiopia.

### **5.5.Lack of inclusiveness of various groups**

The term inclusiveness to referee to the participation and presence of different groups and interests in the leadership and management of local governments. Wereda governments in Ethiopia are sorely lacking in this respect. The study has revealed that the governance and leadership structures of the Woreda lack representativeness. The councils and their executive leadership did not adequately represent women, community and religious organizations, private businesses. These different groups contribute for effective governance at local level self-government and to instilling democratic traditions at local level. Moreover, the involvement of different organizations and interests groups promote popular participation and enhances the role of the wereda in building democratic system.

### **5.6. Lack of downward of accountability**

The study has shown that elected officials of the wereda are considered themselves as representatives of the regional government and the ruling party. They usually give priority to the regional government and party directions than the local community. In principle, elected officials must be accountable to the electorate. However, in practice, downward accountability is usually overlooked. Another factor for the prevalence of poor downward accountability is dominant party system at local government. The wereda council is representatives of the TPLF party and this situation hinders downward accountability but it can reinforce merely upward accountability. Therefore, the issue of downward accountability is not given attention as a mechanism of controlling the officials of wereda local government.

### **5.7.Absence of competitive political parties at local levels**

In the contemporary world, party competition can create better opportunity for the people to have alternative policy options and it one of the parameters for democratic practices. Ethiopia has introduced multi-party politics since the down fall of the military regime in 1991. Although some political parties have been participating election in Tigray region, but they all failed to win elections to have representations in the state council and their failure is attributed to lack of organizational bases to form a strong coalition against the ruling party. Most of the time, they are disorganized and have a limited presence in the rural areas since the rural areas. Besides, political parties don't have better alternative policies and programs which could attract voters during the campaign period, but simply criticizing the ruling party. On the one hand, the opposition parties are not interested to participate in local elections and couldn't widen their popular base at grass root levels. The above facts show that the absence of competitive party would definitely result in poor performance and the dependency of wereda local governments on the regional government.

To sum up, in the past regimes, wereda local governments in Ethiopia were instruments of the regional government. They were purposely established for the sake of implementing the policies,

rules, regulations and political decisions made by the regional government. Similarly, though the degree differs, the woreda local governments are still poorly empowered and less autonomous. In written, woreda local governments are endowed with democratic self-rule provide that there are shared rules. However, in practice, woreda local governments are dependent up on the policy decisions and financial sources of the federal and regional governments

## **6. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation**

### **6.1.Summary**

Empowering local governments has become a political reform and local development policy in both developing and developed countries. Currently, there is a worldwide recognition of the significance of empowering local governments for promoting participation of people at grass root levels, for better provision of services and also for economic development. Though there is difference about the reason devolving powers and duties vary from one country to the other, countries pursue policies of decentralization to equip local governments with for economic and political participation of the local community on their own affairs. In the area of economic development, empowering local governments is viewed to bring efficiency, local participation, and local ownership of development projects. On the other hand, the political aspect of empowering local governments is also entangled with sharing state powers and responsibilities between the center and local governments.

After several decades of highly centralized and unitary political system, Ethiopia has been following federal system of government and decentralization policy immediately after the downfall of the military regime in 1991. The country has introduced decentralizing political powers and duties to lower levels of government particularly to woredas since the year 2001/02. The 2001/2002 proclamation has introduced enhanced devolution of power to the lower tiers of regional governments, to institutionalize decision-making processes at the grassroots level with a view to increase grassroots participation, to promote good governance through inspiring transparency, accountability, and to improve decentralized service delivery to the public and contribute to sustainable development and poverty reduction activities.

Nevertheless, in reality, there has been little effort to empower local governments with genuine devolution of powers and resources and make them autonomous to be able to decide on matters of their locality. Despite the fact that local governments have some powers to make political, economic, social, administrative and fiscal decisions, but some of these powers are still centralized at regional and zonal levels. The regional and zonal administrations usually interfere over the powers and duties of the woreda governments. The woreda council has the power to question and evaluate the performance of woreda administrators, executive members and other activities of the woreda. Nonetheless, these powers and duties have been done by the regional cabinet members. Besides, the appointments of the woreda administrators such as the Chief and Deputy Administrators and other offices are made by the regional president.

With regard to expenditure assignment of woreda local governments, it lacks clarity and formality. Local governments play a limited role in expenditure responsibilities while the regional level sector bureaus play a significant role in fiscal matters. Moreover, the decisions on most of capital expenditures are made at the regional levels. The only expenditure responsibilities of the woreda level governments are limited to some portion of recurrent expenditures. In short, local



governments have limited capacity to mobilize adequate resources and these are the major challenges of local governments in Ethiopia.

In written, the woreda local governments are independent entities to decide up on their local matters but practically, they don't exercise sufficient decision making power on matters pertaining their locality, hence, they are dictated by the regional government. The woredas local governments do not have constitutional right to levy taxes on any item except the collection of the regionally decided taxes. Regions transfer subsidies to local governments are used as a tool to enable the regional government to effectively pursue local policy and service delivery. Thus, they cannot generate adequate revenue from their locality. The dependency of woreda local governments on regional subsidy would result in vulnerability of local governments to be manipulated by regional government.

With regard to the system of accountability, there is no mechanism whereby woreda local governments are accountable to the local people; instead, they have upward accountability to regional officials. Moreover, there is also lack of transparency in planning process in both woredas. The people neither participate in the budgeting process nor have awareness about the allocation and execution of the budget. In terms of transparency in decision making, it is problematic in that the decisions are made secretly by the woreda cabinet members. It is not open to the public and even the implementation of those decisions is not always transparent. This created a confusion of accountability and lack of transparency and interference between the different tiers of governments.

The decentralization process in the region have been challenged by serious capacity problems in terms of administrative, technical as well as resources (financial, manpower and material) to plan and implement their responsibilities to the satisfaction of the community. The region as a whole does not have adequate skilled manpower. The sector bureaus are persistently constrained by shortage of skilled manpower. Besides, at woreda level there is lack of skilled manpower, high turnover of experienced and skilled staffs and inappropriate placement of manpower. There is also lack of qualification among the executive (cabinet) members of the woredas to plan, implement and manage appropriate social and economic development projects and basic public services in their locality.

In relation to participation, it has been found that community participation relates to involvement of people in development projects through the contribution of labor and materials. But there is a problem in addressing the priority needs of the community. Community inputs or its role in planning and budgeting is very low or non-existent. Administratively, in decision making the participation of the community is limited and politically, participation is by way of elections. The role of people in the woredas in the process of decision making concerned the provision of public services is minimal.

Moreover, there are many problems with regard to the quality of the basic services delivery at local levels. Woreda local governments are not delivering the critically needed services to the community because of lack of material and manpower required for the operation and functioning the activities properly.

To put in nutshell, poor empowerment, limited devolution of power and functions, lack of genuine autonomy of the woreda local governments, lack of clarity on the legal and institutional frameworks, absence of political commitment of public officials, lack of clear powers and duties of different tiers of and weak coordination, shortage of skilled man power, budget constraint, heavy financial dependency on the regional and federal government, low level of participating the local communities to decide on their matters of developments agendas and limited connection among different public sectors and other stakeholders, poor public sector service deliveries, infrastructural problems, and the like.

## **6.2.Conclusion**

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A lot have been promised to empower local governments and the local people to reduce poverty through empowering local governments the betterment of different public sectors which are goals that are pertinent to the goals of local governments in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, depending the review of varies literature; it is evident that the process of empowering local governments and making them autonomous to be able to decide on matters of their affairs has become insignificant.

Genuine devolution and empowering local governments needs full autonomy for them to function effectively and efficiently. Besides, local governments should be ensured with full decision-making powers along with both upward and dawn accountabilities. However, local governments don't enjoy sufficient administrative autonomy to respond to the best interest of the local people. In most cases, woreda local governments are neither genuinely empowered with sufficient decision-making authority nor equipped with human and material resources to discharge their responsibilities properly.

Most of the time, the activities of local governments rely on the regional government 's commitment to devolve political, administrative and fiscal powers to local governments such as district level local government 's commitment to devolve such powers to local institutions and kebeles/tabias. Further, genuine empowerment of local governments encompasses building institutional, technical and managerial capacities to perform their various tasks of raising revenues and providing public services in efficient and effective manner. Besides, real devolving of political power also requires an appropriate legislative framework which clearly defines responsibilities and powers of local governments as well as the expected relationship between regional and lower levels of government.

As mentioned previously, financial independence of local governments is the key factor for them to perform their responsibilities properly. In general, the more financial autonomy of local governments, the greater their decision-making authority to focus on local concerns and priorities. Instead, most of local governments in Ethiopia are heavily dependent on the budget of regional governments which comes in the form of block grants using a set of criteria. Although woreda councils have the formal legal authority to allocate block grants amongst different sectoral programs, the actual expenditure of the resources and important decisions on allocation of budget is greatly influenced by directives that originate from the regional and federal governments.

Administrative autonomy is also another important aspect of local governments. Even though the woreda local governments are given autonomy in planning, administering, and managing public services, however, there are restrictions in which local governments are not fully exercising their

devolved powers, particularly, in personnel administration due to the actions of zonal and regional bodies. Irregularity of rules and regulations originating from regional bodies as regards to planning and personnel administration are some of the impediments that subdued the exercise independent decision-making powers of local governments. Generally speaking, poor empowerment of local governments in terms of finance, absence of skilled man power, limited resources and weak institutional capacity of the woreda local governments would result in poor empowerment and absence of full autonomy of local governments in Ethiopia.

### **6.3.RECOMMENDATIONS**

Local governments should be empowered with sufficient decision-making power and serve as autonomous entities so as to satisfy the local community. They should be given full autonomy in the planning and budgeting of their activities, especially, in allocating the budget into recurrent and capital portions according to their needs. Moreover, they should have also the authority and autonomy on personnel administration which free from the interference of regional governments.

There should be a strong legal framework setting out the powers, rights and duties of different government tiers in the region. Without such a framework, it is often impossible to know who is responsible for what. The role confusion allows zonal and regional governments to interfere easily in which the lower authorities are unable to stop such interferences. There should also be strong political commitment, leadership and dedication from the relevant government institutions and personnel, and other stakeholders as well as support from top level management, both politically and in the allocation of the necessary human, material and financial resources.

The local community should play great role in electing local representative who could serve the people and accountable them. This requires transparency and accountability of government actions and the possibility to have access to relevant information such as budgets, accounts and plans.

Among others, shortage of trained human resource is the bottleneck of woreda local governments. Hence, capacitating woreda local governments with resources (human and material), administrative and technical capacities should be given priority to exist as viable and autonomous units of self-ruled administrations. Besides, local governments should introduce positive and staff motivating incentive mechanisms so that employees should be committed to discharge their responsibilities.

We equipped local governments require adequate financial resource. But most local governments in Ethiopia are financially constrained due to their low revenue generating and weak administrative capacities. Hence, measures to increase the revenue base should be seriously emphasized by the federal and regional governments.

Engaging the local community in identifying problems and prioritizing their needs, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of local development activities is a cornerstone for genuine empowerment of local governments to accomplish their desirable changes that satisfy the public. Therefore, local governments should be autonomous in mobilize and actively participate the local community at all levels of decision-making process.

Finally, the reviewer recommends that local governments in Ethiopia are poorly empowered and have little autonomy. Therefore, they need further attention and the subject matter in order to

provide more conclusive findings over the direction and impact of the program in the region using the preliminary findings of this study as a springboard and stepping stone.

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