



Local Government in Ethiopia

Responses to Urban-Rural Challenges

edited by

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November 2021

The Country Report on Local Government in Ethiopia is a product of the LoGov-project: “Local Government and the Changing Urban-Rural Interplay”.

The H2020-MSCA-RISE-2018 project aims to provide solutions for local governments that address the fundamental challenges resulting from urbanisation. To address these complex issues, 18 partners from 17 countries and six continents share their expertise and knowledge in the realms of public law, political science, and public administration. LoGov identifies, evaluates, compares, and shares innovative practices that cope with the impact of changing urban-rural relations in major local government areas (WP 1-5).

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This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 823961.



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Structure of Local Government



4.3. Amalgamating Five Special Local Governments into a Single Administrative Zone vs Self-Government Rights of Ethnic Groups in SNNPRS

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Relevance of the Practice

What are generally termed as nation, nationalities and peoples under the 1995 FDRE Constitution, otherwise called as ethnic groups, are the right-bearers and are entitled to have their own states, zones or local governments depending on their level of economic and political development. Hence, state structures are designed to fit the interests of ethnic groups. However, in reality, only nine regional states came into being for the more than 85 ethnic groups. In consequence, other ethnic groups are entitled to establish their own ethnic zones and local governments. The justification is to guarantee each ethnic group the right to self-rule. The five special local governments in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPRS) were created to satisfy the self-administration demands of five ethnic groups in the region. These local governments are mainly rural local governments having one administrative capital at the center. The populations are mainly homogenous inhabited by a single ethnic group. The urban centers are relatively heterogeneous but still dominated by their respective ethnic groups. However, there is no visible difference in terms of urban-rural dimension as both of them are inhabited by the same ethnic groups. The major purpose of establishing local governments in these special *woredas* were to accommodate ethnic interests in the form of creating local governments for numerically smaller ethnic groups.

If one reads the preamble of the 1995 FDRE Constitution together with Articles 8, 39, 46 and 47,¹²¹ it is self-explanatory that accommodation of ethnic identity is given utmost importance

¹²¹ Art 8 provides that: (i) All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia, (ii) This Constitution is an expression of their sovereignty, and (iii) Their sovereignty shall be expressed through their representatives elected in accordance with this Constitution and through their direct democratic participation. Art 39 deals with the rights of nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia which reads in full as: (i) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession, (ii) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history, (iii) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and federal governments.

Nation, nationality and people for the purpose of this Constitution is defined as: 5) a group of people who have or share large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a



in the Ethiopian federal system. In consequence, the organization of sub-national states and other local governments are in line with ethnic identity, language and other identity markers of nations, nationalities and peoples (NNP). The Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) is one of the nine regional states of Ethiopia created in 1995 by bringing together 56 officially recognized ethnic groups. It is one of the most diverse states of Ethiopia comprising more than 50 per cent of the country's ethnic groups. For this reason, the region is known as a federation within a federation.

Although the region is considered as a single region in the Ethiopian federation, it comprises various forms of administrative hierarchies designed for accommodating ethnic diversities.¹²² As a result, it was organized along zonal, *woreda*, special *woreda* and *kebele*¹²³ levels. SNNPRS is one of the regions where the workability of the Ethiopian federal system of accommodating ethnic diversity could be practically tested as many of the ethnic groups are claiming and reclaiming for the redrawing of their boundaries and even for their own independent statehood.

Description of the Practice

Before the creation of the SNNPRS and the drafting of the 1995 Constitution, the region was organized into five regional states (region 7-11) named in numbers as region 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 as per Proclamation no 7/1992. During the transitional period (1991-1994) Ethiopia was structured into 14 regional states whose designation was in numerals rather than on an ethnic basis. However, with the coming into force of the new Constitution in 1995, the five regions were merged to create the SNNPRS. The process of amalgamation was not welcomed by all

common or related identity, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.

Art 46 sets the criteria for state boundary demarcation. It explains: (i) The Federal Democratic Republic shall comprise of States, (ii) States shall be delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned.

Art 47 lists down member states with possibilities for establishing additional states if a demand for statehood comes from other nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. It says: (1) Member States of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia are theFollowing: (i) The State of Tigray, (ii) The State of Afar, (iii) The State of Amhara, (iv) The State of Oromia, (v) The State of Somalia, (vi) The State of Benshangul/Gumuz, (vii) The State of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, (viii) The State of the Gambella Peoples, (ix) The State of the Harari People. It further guarantees that; (2) Nations, Nationalities and Peoples within the States enumerated in sub-Article1 of this article have the right to establish, at any time, their own States, provided that certain procedures are fulfilled as provided in the Constitution.

¹²² Art 45 of the Constitution of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State provides for organizing the state at *zonal*, special *woreda*, *woreda* and *kebele* level. If a need arises, it provides for the possibilities of establishing at other administrative levels.

¹²³ *Kebele* is an Amharic term to denote the lowest level of state administration in Ethiopia.



ethnic groups. For example, the Sidama (the largest ethnic group in the region) asserted for the restoration of their regional status.

Following the creation of the SNNPRS, the newly created region was sub-divided into 14 zones (Benchi Maji, Dawro, Gamo Gofa, Gedeo, Gurage, Hadiya, Keffa, Kembata Tembaro, Sheka, Sidama, Silte, South Omo, Wolayita and Hawassa Special Zones) and 8 special *woredas* (Alaba, Amaro, Basketo, Burji, Dirashe, Konso, Konta and Yem). It was in 2011 that the regional state decided to merge the four special *woredas* of Konso, Dirashe, Amaro and Burji, and one regular *woreda* of Alle into a larger administrative zone called Segen Peoples Zone. The newly established Zone consists of eight ethnic groups; Konso, Burji, Kore, Alle, Dirashe, Kusume, Mashole and Mossiye. The move indicates the ideological shift of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) from ethnic accommodation to administrative convenience and efficiency.¹²⁴ These four ethnic groups have their own languages and have experienced self-administration for the last two decades. Moreover, the new administrative unit, the Segen Peoples Zone, does not reflect ethnic identification but is designated after a big river flowing in the area.

Before the merger in 2011, the Konso people had their own Konso special *woreda*. However, the minority Alle ethnic group also live in their own *kebele* administration in Konso. Based on the 2007 Central Statistics Agency Report, the *woreda's* population was 235,087. Konso, the language of the Konso people, is spoken as a mother-tongue by the majority of the population and more than 87 per cent of the *woreda's* population belong to Konso while 9 per cent are Alle (previously called Gewada).

The Dirashe special *woreda* was established for the Dirashe ethnic group but it also constitutes other minority ethnic groups such as Alle/Dobassate, Mossiye, Kusume and Mashole. Its population number was reported to be 30,031 as per the 2007 population census. The Burji special *woreda* was designated for the Burji people which accounts for 71,871. The Kore ethnic group was administering the Amaro special *woreda*. It has a population of 149,384.¹²⁵ Over all, the four major ethnic groups administered their own affairs in their own self-governing special *woredas* before their merger into the Segen Area People's Zone in 2011.

Assessment of the Practice

The amalgamation of various self-governing ethnic local governments into a single administrative zone is unfortunately not a success story. From the very outset, it was a top-

¹²⁴ Thomas Halabo Temesgen, 'Accommodation of Ethnic Quest for Self-Governance under Ethnic Federal System in Ethiopia: The Experience of Southern Regional State' (2013) 3 International Journal of Research in Commerce, IT and Management 42.

¹²⁵ Misganaw Addis Moges, 'Practice of Self-Government in the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State: The Case of Segen Area Peoples' Zone' (MA thesis, Addis Ababa University 2014).



down approach where the regional state decided to implement for so-called integration of the four special *woredas* into a zonal structure for administrative convenience without any historical, linguistic, geographic or legal justifications to merge a completely different ethnic and linguistic communities. There was strong resistance, both during and after the formation of the Segen Peoples Zone, claiming for their separate existence as special *woredas* maintaining their distinct identities.

The creation of the Segen Area People's Zone was triggered by the demands of the Ale people for their own self-governing administrative unit. The Ale are a minority ethnic group divided between Konso and Dirashe Special *Woredas*. Nonetheless, they demanded to have their own administrative units separating from these two *woredas*. The ruling party of the region, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPD), opted for three options; (i) to join Ale with the neighboring multiethnic South Omo Zone, (ii) to grant its own special *woreda* or (iii) to create a new administrative zone by combining the four special *woredas* including the Ale. The first two options did not work as it was rejected by the South Omo Zone and the second was feared for incurring additional costs. The region then opted for amalgamating the special *woredas* to create a new zone.¹²⁶ However, the move was unacceptable for the previously independent *woredas* as it reduced their autonomy. It precipitated public protest and sustained human and material losses since then.

The move of integration may be good, but it has to be made from a bottom-up approach and should not be imposed from the higher authorities. The experience seems a failure in light of the major protests and deaths and displacements that followed government crackdowns. In a federation that was established to accommodate the interests of different ethnic groups for self-government, any move to integrate or split must pass through rigorous public consultation and must respect the demands of the people.

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This project has received funding from
the European Union's Horizon 2020 re-
search and innovation programme under
grant agreement No 823961.

