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Introduction

Zemelak Ayele[*]

Decentralized political and governance systems,in which small and disconnected communities took care of their affairs with no or little outside interference, were the natural and most common state of affairs in the past.As James T Young wrote some 120 years ago, the cardinal principle of pre-nineteenth-century state administration was"the performance by the parish, the town, the county and other local bodies, of an unusual share of state functions, and the comparative freedom of these distinctively local units from central administrative interference or control" (1897, p. 40). This was largely so because a community in one locality had little contact with communities in other localities due to natural barriers and a lack of means of communication.

This started to change as political, economic and social factors began to allow even force states to centralise. The rise of the nation-state and the quest for nation-building led states to take institutional and political measures geared towards centralisation. Political and economic centralisation was deemed to pave the way to the creation of "a uniform society, which was seen as the ideal to pursue"(Özkan, 2016).With the rise of "the administrative state", governments began establishing agencies which assumed functions that were hitherto considered outside the public realm.[1] Later, economic efficiency and equity were put forth as a justification for centralisation. This became the case with

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1 The national government's role was previously restricted to maintaining internal security by using police force and preventing external aggression by establishing a national army. The legislative, executive and judicial organs were also viewed as the only necessary state organs. This changed as the services that government provides incrementally grew, leading to the establishment of countless government agencies. The agencies are run by unelected public servants, resulting in what is called the "administrative state". Administrative agencies, though run by unelected public servants, exercise important legislative, executive and judicial powers on multitudes of matters, ranging from regulating road traffic to much more complex matters. Now the decisions of administrative agencies impact peoples' lives much more than that of the political and judicial institutions. See Epstein, 2008; Dobkin, 2008.

the rise of communism and the growing acceptance of Keynesian economic theory after the Second World War, since both of these bodies of thought advocated for the involvement of the state in the economy, albeit to a differing extent.

The rise of the welfare state in the second half the twentieth century also encouraged centralisation "by encouraging collectivist attitudes and behaviour, with the promise of increasing wealth and elevating the living conditions of individuals to the most ideal level"(Özkan, 2016),p. 24). A similar process of nation-building and bureaucratization took place in the newly independent African and other states, which also led to a greater centralization in these countries. While the rise of the nation-state, the administrative state and the welfare state provided the theoretical justification for centralization, the expansion of infrastructure such as roads and railways and communication technologies made centralisation possible by allowing the center to contact and control the localities.

A reversal in the global trend of centralisation began in the 1980s. The quest for nation-building was replaced with the quest for multiculturalism which entailed decentralization for the purpose of managing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. The welfare state faced challenges with the rise of neo-liberalism which advocated for limited government and a free market undisturbed by state interference. Friedrichvon Hayek's economic theory enjoyed a resurgence, arguing, contrary to Keynesian theory, that state involvement in the economy is not only inept in catering to "a multiplicity of disparate and often conflicting" human wants but is antithetical to individual liberty (Vaughn, 1999, p. 136). Having linked the free market with political liberty, Hayek advocated for decentralised and rule-based decision-making (Vaughn, 1999).

The administrative state also faced similar challenges from the new public management paradigm, which dismissed the notion of civil service as "a providential calling", a selfless act or a sacrifice, as fictitious. Civil servants, according to the new paradigm, were motivated by selfish reasons and thus the civil service could be run more efficiently based on market principles in which citizens are viewed as customers and public servants as businesspeople. This entailed organising public institutions on the basis

of a decentralized, business-type structure and running of public services on the basis of market-type competition.[2]

As advancement in road infrastructure and communication technologies in the previous century had made centralisation possible, advancement in information technology in the twenty-first century enabled small political units to handle responsibilities that hitherto only national governments could undertake, thereby not only making possible but also encouraging decentralized governance. At the same time, globalisation and the advancement in communication technology rendered nation-states unable to handle vast arrays of economic matters, requiring the states to form or join supra-national institutions, such as the European Union. It is this simultaneous process of centralization (at supra-national level) and decentralization that scholars refer to as "glocalization". Decentralization of political, administrative, and financial powers to subnational governments has now become a dominant, inevitable, and unstoppable trend (Hankla, 2009). Nowadays, there is barely a country in the world that has not implemented some form of decentralization.

Ethiopia, like many African countries, underwent centralization for more than a century. Modernization, economic development, and nation-building were notions justifying the incremental centralization, but the centralized system resulted in multifaceted poverty, not to mention political, economic, and cultural marginalization that affected scores of ethno-national communities in the country. This led in turn to political instability and decades of civil war, which ended only in 1991 when the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) assumed power.

Since 1991, Ethiopia has implemented a decentralization programme in two phases. In the first phase, the country, hitherto a unitary state, became a federal state, with a central government, nine regional states and two federal cites. The federal system of the country was principally intended to respond to the "nationality question". Hence, the nine regional states, the constituent units of the Ethiopian federation, were chiefly organised to em-

2 Within the NPM paradigm, there were several theories, including the public choice theory and public agent theory, which viewed the administrative state as costly, wasteful and unaccountable and called for the downsizing of government to abolish hierarchy, which is a defining characteristic of government bureaucracy, and emulate the market in terms of running government businesses.

power ethno-national groups, even though, having several intra-regional minority ethnic communities within their boundaries, none of them were ethnically homogeneous. It was, therefore, imperative to accommodate intra-regional minority ethnic communities, which involved considering local government as an alternative mechanism for doing so. The local government units in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State (SNNPRS)and the Awi, Himyra and Kemise zones of the Amhara Regional State are good examples that demonstrate the use of local government as means for accommodating ethno-national groups at local-government level.

The second phase of the decentralisation process, which was meant to respond to the challenges of underdevelopment, began in 2000 when the federal government adopted a plan for poverty-reduction. The plan sought to use decentralization as a means to reduce poverty in the country. In the early 2000s, the country undertook policy, constitutional and legal reforms that aimed to establish a functioning local government system that can be of use in reducing poverty.

Twenty years after the introduction of the Ethiopian federal system, and 15 years after the introduction of the second phase of decentralization, debate in the country still focuses on the ethnic issue and constitutional provisions dealing with the right to self–determination of the Ethiopian ethnic communities. Discussions on development are often limited reflecting on matters only at the macro-level. There are indeed few works on local government and service delivery in Ethiopia.[3] Some of the works were, however, published more than ten years ago and thus do not address recent political and economic developments having an impact on local governance. Others are focused on institutional issues (those to do with the constitutional and legal frameworks regulating local government), with little discussion, based on empirical evidences, of the actual functioning of local government.[4]Local government often enters political and academic discussion as a side-issue or only to the extent that it is relevant for a discussion of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. Local government and the provision of basic services rarely feature in such discussion. The relevance of local government for democratization and development or poverty-reduction is thus not given the kind of attention

3 For example, Taye&Tegegne (2007).

4 For example, Ayele (2014).

that it deserves both from politicians and scholars.

In the light of the above, this special edition of the *EJFS* seeks to investigate the role of local government in socio-economic and political development in Ethiopia using comparative and case-study methods. In addition to identifying the manner in which local government operates in Ethiopia, the research aims to provide evidence-based insight into the state of local government in Ethiopia that can assist policymakers and practitioners.

Overview of contents

The special issue contains seven articles, including this one, that inquire into the developmental role and functions of local government in Ethiopia. The next article, a contribution by Zemelak Ayele entitled "Institutional features of a developmental local government", is based on international literature and outlines the ideal institutional design for development-oriented local government. This article, which seeks to lay a theoretical foundation for the subsequent articles, argues that a developmental local government has to be institutionally designed in a manner that balances local autonomy with central supervision. Solomon Nigussie and Zemelak Ayele's contribution, entitled "The constitutional and legislative framework for local government in Ethiopia", provides an overall description of the national and subnational constitutional and legislative framework governing local government in Ethiopia. The article discusses the place and status of local government in the Ethiopian federal matrix. It deals furthermore with the organisation, functional competences and sources of revenue of local government.

The next four articles are based on case studies that examine whether or not local government units (*woredas* and cities) have political, financial and administrative autonomy and how that impacts on their developmental role. Assefa Fiseha, in his contribution entitled 'Local-level decentralization in Ethiopia: A case study of Tigray Regional State", undertakes an in-depth investigation into the state of local government in the Tigray region. Based on empirical evidence, Fiseha argues that, at a formal level, *woredas* and cities in Tigray state seem to enjoy some degree of political and financial autonomy. However, in practice, he main-

tains, they"act more as deconcentrated than autonomous units since their autonomy is curtailed by higher-level governments and party structures".

In their contribution entitled "Autonomy, Capacity and service provision of local governments in Oromia", a work based on field studies in two *woredas* and a city administration in Oromia, Ketema Wakjira and Regassa Bayissa argue that there are mismatches between the local capacities and functional responsibilities of local governments in delivering public services- water supply and primary health care. They underscore that local public service delivery in Oromia cannot be effective unless there are adequate structural, financial, human and material capabilities at the local government levels. In turn, Asnake Kefale and Ketema Wakjira investigate the state of service delivery in the Assossa city administration of Benishangul-Gumuz state. They argue that the institutional insecurity of urban local government that stems from a lack of constitutional recognition "has made urban local governance uncertain and municipal decentralization ineffective". Neither Assosa, the capital of the region, nor other smaller municipalities have adequate competence and resources to ensure the provision of essential services such as supplying residents with potable water.

Christophe van der Beken and Beza Dessalegn, in their joint contribution entitled "Urban government autonomy and good governance in Ethiopia: The case of Hawassa city", deal with urban governance in Hawassa, the capital of the SNNPRS. They argue that, at a formal level, the city of Hawassa has adequate competences and powers. These powers are not, however exercised in such a way as to bring about "all-round societal development" in the city, a situation which is due to ethnic dominance of a supposedly multi-ethnic city and the lack of proper downward accountability.

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