Constructing Regional Development Policy for Border Areas of Ethiopia: Reflection on Perspectives

Tsegaye Tegenu

May 05, 2011

The purpose of this article is to discuss the perspectives and dynamics of regional development policy particularly for border areas of the country. There are two points which I want to underline. First, the idea and model of regional development is not based on one perspective. Depending on the causal factors, there are at least cultural, political and economic perspectives used for the formation of regional development policies. Second, the current and futures of regional development is not static and path dependent. Regional economic development is dynamic and it changes overtime as the state, social and individual interest shifts.

I am inspired to write this short comment after reading the article titled “Bridging the Gaps: The Need for Positive Engagement to the National Security Challenges of Eritrea”, written by Meressa Tsehaye. After discussing the backgrounds and development of the “the Moslim/Christian, lowland/highland, Arabic/Tigrigna division of Eritrean politics”, and the national security of Ethiopia, the author suggested “peaceful approach” to “sustainably defuse and eliminate the chauvinist leadership thinking (of EPLF)”. He wrote “The peaceful approaches should include open declaration by the Ethiopian elites and state-builders that Eritrea is a sovereign state and the Eritrean ports are part of its sovereignty. The open recognition… could pave the way to the formation of economic community between the two states”.

Currently we have debate on economic policy and strategy at the national level. I think that encourage such an open and honest discussion on regional development policy, particularly along the border areas contributes to the clarity of the national development strategy. My intention in this note is not to examine the suggestion of the author. I do not have the tool to evaluate the consequences of the suggestion. If I am not mistaken, the suggestion has already been tried in the past when the Ethiopian government acknowledged the independence of Eritrea. Why is there a need for re-declaration? I do not think that the suggestion of the author is not different from the past and current policy of the Ethiopian government. My reading of the article suggests to me that the author might have followed an established way of approaching the regional problem, namely from a cultural perspective.

My view is that in addition to the cultural perspective there are at least political and economic perspectives used for modeling regional development policy. As the author mentioned in detail, EPLF, for instance, has a political perspective to regional development. For EPLF, regional development is based on the logic of political, military and diplomatic control of territories (including ports) and their resources. The logic of territory control in Ethiopia is based on decentralization. Even if the northern border regions have similar ethnic groups, they have different spatial institutional structure (centralization versus decentralization). How can you one construct a regional development model under such conditions? Can one integrate (if possible) the cultural and the political perspectives as mechanisms for regional development? Does the “No war, No peace” status quo show the limitation of the cultural and political perspectives?

I think an economic perspective and model of regional development affords important insights. Regional economic development model deals with issues of both development and
distribution. It explains “the territorial division of labor (who does what, where and when, what rewards they receive and in what relationships they stand to other people and economic activities in other places) and the constantly evolving resource endowments on which it depends”. To economic geographers regional economic development is a cumulative process in which local actors of (individuals, firms, governments, and business coalitions) create local growth coalitions and seek to establish mutually beneficial relationships with other organizations beyond the local milieu. Economic models of regional development lead to the identification of centrifugal and centripetal forces and other equalizing and unequalising mechanisms.

This brings me to my second point of discussion, namely to the dynamics of regional economic development. The driving forces of regional development policy change as the economy develop or retard. There are no fixed actors and ambitions. One can mention lessons from China and Sweden. In China, during the period of Mao, investments were diverted from the more developed coastal areas to the poorer interior parts of the country in order to create a balanced regional development. Since this policy was criticized as inefficient, during Deng’s rise to power, the policy was reversed. But Deng’s uneven development led to wide gap in regional development. In the 1996-2000 five year plan the earlier policy of allocating investment to interior regions was advocated. In the course of the last five decades Sweden has seen three perspective changes in modeling regional development. The first is the welfare state, which is dominated by strong national starting points and a symmetrical social organization that guaranteed equal opportunity in the whole country. The welfare state had an ambition for reallocating resources regionally to maintain a balanced development while modernizing the economy.

The second perspective was the “Competition State” which has grown up since the 1980s. Economic growth emerged more clearly as a political objective and the government assisted in the forming competitive production niches, that is, on the supply side. Under this perspective, even if there was a strong belief in the region as an engine for growth, urban areas were the focus while the idea of nation as a homogenous territory faded away.

The third and the recent perspective is called the “network state”, where authorities are working together to resolve their specifications and find effective working arrangements. Organizational boundaries and geographical divisions are crossed and become more flexible.

The dynamics of regional development in Sweden shows that regions rather than states have gradually become the major focus in discussions of economic policy. Economic and political interests were united around the idea of geographical areas primarily based on, and interconnected by, functionality, rather than by antiquated administrative borders.

The model and perspective of regional development are and will not remain static and path dependent. They change over time depending on the progress of the socio-economic processes and the shift in the interest of the state, the society and the individual. There is no need to adhere to original circumstances that led to emergence of a given perspective. Individuals should consider and respond to changes in the environment particularly when such responses start to lead to a better overall outcome.

For sending your comments I can be reached at tsegaye.tegenu@epmc.se

References
