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## **An Assessment of Intergovernmental Relations in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This research work is aimed at highlighting the pertinent issues associated with intergovernmental relations in Nigeria. The research objectives include: to determine the nature of intergovernmental relations in Nigeria, to ascertain the role of intergovernmental relations in improving service delivery in core sectors of the Nigeria economy, and to determine the place of local government in intergovernmental relations in Nigeria. This study made use of both the primary and secondary sources of gathering data. From the findings of this study, it is discovered that the existing mechanisms and institutions for intergovernmental policy coordination are weak and need strengthening. This study recommends that more attention should be paid to the equity dimension of revenue sharing, government accountability for utilization of public money in general and for use of a common pool of funds such as the federation account in particular should be strengthened. In addition, this study also recommend the introduction of specific grant schemes directly linked to expansion of subnational government financing in key sectors.

**Keywords:** Intergovernmental, Relations, Coordination, Economy, Nigeria.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Intergovernmental relations (IGR) are an integral and pervasive part of modern political systems, of growing importance as complexities of modern governance increase. They have become a notable feature of federal political systems; however, they are an important component of any political system with more than one level of government. There is no necessary correlation between the system of government and the degree of centralization of IGR or the relative power between the various levels of government. National governments such as Nigeria, by contrast, can (again, at least in principle), abolish, restructure or neuter their constituent units. This essential characteristic means that IGR in federations have some distinctive features absent from IGR in non-federal countries.

In particular, the constitutional underpinning of constituent units with the full array of executive, legislative and judicial institutions provide them with 'hard' protections and their own political constituency. Therefore, political motivations and considerations of policy autonomy shape the conduct of IGR in a way that may not be so evident – or even possible – for sub-national levels of government in a unitary state. This is likely to be particularly true for countries such as China and Vietnam where centralized political control through their respective Communist Parties are likely to permeate and overshadow formal decentralization measures taken in financial and administrative governance.

The existence of a presidential system can also have important effects on IGR, primarily by dispersing the channels of communications (Watts 2008: 119). However, there are examples of centralized and decentralized, effective and ineffective IGR institutions in both presidential and parliamentary systems.

This article describes the main dimensions, institutions and processes of IGR, looking primarily at IGR in federations such as Nigeria. A number of trends and challenges are identified, and implications are drawn for the analysis of IGR.

## **WHAT ARE INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?**

We can define intergovernmental relations (IGR) as the processes and institutions through which governments within a political system interact. All countries, whether unitary or federal, have IGR of some sort, provided they have more than one level of government. Analysis of IGR has traditionally focused on the formal structures and institutions of IGR, in particular those connected with the financial arrangements between the levels of government (Painter 2012: 731). However, IGR also involves extensive informal processes of exchange and interaction.

As governments increased in size and scope during the twentieth century, new issues arose that local matters became matters of national social, economic or environmental significance or at least matters of political and policy interest to national governments. Positive and negative spillovers in areas like transport, water, the environment and business regulation meant that roles and responsibilities between levels of government were no longer clear cut and that IGR of some sort were required to establish policy positions and accountabilities as well as administrative protocols between governments. Crucially, with the rise in national income tax as a tool of macroeconomic policy and welfare state redistribution, national governments invariably raised more revenue than they could spend and fiscal transfers to sub-national units became much more important. This dictated that IGR of some sort were necessary (Fenna, 2012: 754).

As a result of these and other factors – including judicial decisions on matters of dispute between the levels of government – the need for regular IGR became more obvious. Coordinate federalism was increasingly replaced by concurrent federalism, which required the different levels of government to deal with each other, even if only sporadically. This in turn raised the need for cooperation as well as the potential for duplication, overlap, complexity, political opportunism, coercion and gaming. A common response to these developments has been to seek a more ‘rational’ allocation of roles and responsibilities (to rekindle the initial coordinate intent of the constitution), although whether this should be achieved by a return of powers to the states or additional powers for the central government is contested.

The alternative to re-drawing ‘bright lines’ between governments is cooperative federalism, which of necessity implies a more complete and coherent set of IGR institutions and processes to govern the inevitable concurrency of government responsibilities (Wanna et al. 2009). As noted, such concurrency implies at least a minimum level of consultation, cooperation and coordination between governments, as well as conflict resolution mechanisms and a willingness to adapt to changing

circumstances. The extent to which this can be done effectively and efficiently is a crucial question, as is the issue of whether cooperative IGR may come at the expense of democratic accountability (Poirier and Saunders 2010:8).

## **HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY**

1. Ho: There is no significant relationship between intergovernmental relations and efficient service delivery.  
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2. Ho: There is no smooth and effective intergovernmental relation between the tiers of government in Nigeria.  
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3. Ho: There is no significant relationship between intergovernmental relations and the local government in Nigeria.  
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## **IGR INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES**

There is a wide range of IGR institutions and processes, most of which are extra-constitutional. Most belong to the executive branch of government.

### **The Legislature:**

Almost all federations have bicameral parliaments, and most have some form of regional influenced representation in their second chamber or upper house. Countries use a range of legislative techniques to facilitate IGR coordination or give effect to national laws. Parliaments occasionally play a formal role in monitoring the executive in particular areas of IGR, such as foreign treaties which place obligations on the sub-national governments. But generally the legislature is a junior player compared to the executive.

### **The Executive:**

Executive federalism dominates, with most IGR taking place between the executives of the respective governments, including both political office bearers and public servants. Interaction generally involves a range of standing and ad hoc councils and committees, as well as ongoing discussions between officials. These executive mechanisms vary in their level of formality, openness and effectiveness, and indeed have been the subject of criticism for allegedly undermining public accountability and democratic control of government (Poirier and Saunders 2010: 8).

Many countries have a peak intergovernmental body at which heads of government meet regularly to discuss common issues and propose joint actions. Often connected to the peak IGR body are meetings of ministers responsible for particular policy areas, which are usually supported by officials' meetings. In some countries, horizontal IGR bodies have been established to enable constituent units to work with each other without the participation of the federal government.

## **INTERGOVERNMENTAL AGREEMENTS (IGA)**

An important method of coordinating IGR in all countries occurs through formal agreements between governments. In some countries these are legislated, but in most, they are concluded through executive agreement alone – although they may form the basis subsequently for legislation and the establishment of funding programs or new agencies. Major national agreements are normally multilateral but some include bilateral agreements so the Commonwealth and individual state governments can sort out details or deal with issues relating to a particular jurisdiction.

Agreements typically assign roles and responsibilities to the signatory governments; detail any financial provisions; and establish reporting requirements. Many arise from the distribution of funds to the states to deliver services. Such agreements can be more or less detailed in terms of the obligations they place on the signatories. Their legal status varies, and dispute resolution mechanisms are usually not detailed to any great extent.

### **Independent and Joint Agencies**

A common IGR mechanism is to establish a joint or independent agency to deal with a specific public policy issue (Poirier and Saunders 2010:6). These often arise from an IGA and may be further supported by legislation. Such IGR bodies are sometimes established and funded solely by the federal government but with the states having a role in appointing or approving their member. Such bodies deal with a range of issues including fiscal federalism. A common effect of establishing these executive bodies is to depoliticize an issue after initial negotiations and discussions have taken place and a resolution reached.

### **Public Service**

The public service is crucial to the conduct of IGR in all countries. It is the ‘engine room’ where detailed work is done, both through formal meetings of officials as well as through personal relations and informal interactions. Often, and in keeping with the diplomacy analogy concerning IGR, it is the job of the public service to maintain relations and dialogue with other governments even during times of political tensions and stand offs (Poirier and Saunders 2010: 6).

However, it cannot be assumed that the public service of each jurisdiction is necessarily unified. Line agencies (responsible for most of the spending and service delivery functions and often reliant to an important degree on fund) differ markedly from central agencies in how they approach IG. Line agencies traditionally have a more pragmatic and cooperative relationship with the central government. Central agencies take a more active role in IGR and asserted political and policy control over line agencies to ensure that government priorities are adhered to, including in IGR. This is often accompanied by an increase in resources, including dedicated IGR units or sections collocated with their cabinet or policy unit. While national governments normally have access to more financial and human resources, even they can find it difficult to cover the wide array of skills and competences involved in IGR properly (Menzies 2011; Harwood and Phillimore 2012: 48–50). This is even more the case for constituent units, for whom IGR can often be seen as a nuisance or intrusion into their regular activities and a burden on their administrative resources.

### **Political Parties and Interest Groups**

Political parties can have a large influence on IGR. If parties are very centralised and hold power at both national and sub-national level, then national leaders may overwhelm and dominate regional or state governments despite what the formal division of powers may say (Watts 2008: 119–20). Interest groups can both reflect and influence the form of IGR in a country. Business groups and trade unions have steadily become more national in organization, focus and policy prescriptions, as the federal government has taken on more responsibility for economic competition, regulation and industry policy. Key professional bodies (lawyers, doctors, other health professions) were traditionally subject to state legislation, and have been slower to agree to national regulation, with smaller jurisdictions (supported by their state governments) often holding out against moves to ‘go national.’

### **SUMMARY**

In a globalizing and interdependent world, IGR are increasingly important to politics, policy and administration. Understanding the various dimensions, institutions, processes and challenges of IGR may not necessarily lead to harmonious relations, but further study of this important aspect of public policy and administration should highlight some possibilities for reform and more effective outcomes for citizens and governments alike.

IGR has traditionally been dominated by informal processes and power relationships, but that formalization and institutionalization have increased and can provide greater certainty and protection for sub-national governments in dealing with central government.

### **CONCLUSION**

From the above, we may draw the following concluding observations.

- (1) Relatedly, not all governments possess the financial and human resources, or the political inclination, to conduct IGR conscientiously or effectively. Most place a higher priority on policy and politics within their own jurisdiction
- (2) Power is at the centre of any system of IGR – and is closely linked to the relative fiscal capacity of the various governments.
- (3) IGR are more like diplomatic relations than contractual or legal relations.
- (4) Notwithstanding the previous points, the ‘hard’ protections which federations provide for their constituent units do set a base, however flawed, from which states can undertake IGR. This may not be the case in unitary countries.
- (5) Path dependence is frequently observed and important. Whether a country is on an integrative or devolutionary path makes a difference in terms of determining what might be regarded as the ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’ direction of IGR reform.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

For effective intergovernmental relations in Nigeria, this study recommends the following measures:

- (1) It is necessary to go beyond the formal rules, regulations and institutions of IGR to understand their substance. Trying to understand IGR in Australia from a reading of the constitution will not provide a full picture, and nor will a simple reading of communiqués or intergovernmental agreements.

- (2) For all sub-national governments, preserving control over key policy and administrative decisions affecting their areas of responsibility (both geographical and policy) are likely to be crucial – and legitimate – goals. Central governments need to remember this.
- (3) Increase in the number and range of actors involved in IGR adds complexity and hence, potentially, inefficiency to their operation. But it also allows for asymmetry, bilateralism, competition, collaboration, experimentation, and opportunism, all of which can have positive as well as negative effects.
- (4) While effective formal IGR institutions are important, so too are ‘soft’ skills, values and competencies. Trust and respect between governments are particularly important.
- (5) Investing in IGR capacity is crucial to achieving better outcomes, both for each level of government and for the system as a whole.

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