

Intergovernmental Relations among the Three Tiers of Government in Nigeria: Federal–State–Local Dynamics and Governance Implications

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Intergovernmental relations (IGR) constitute a central mechanism through which federal systems operate, influencing governance efficiency, policy coordination, and development outcomes. Nigeria's federal structure constitutionally recognizes three tiers of government federal, state, and local each with assigned functions and responsibilities. Despite this arrangement, Nigeria's intergovernmental relations are characterized by persistent tensions, fiscal dependence, constitutional ambiguities, and political interference. This study critically examines the nature, structures, and challenges of intergovernmental relations in Nigeria, focusing on federal–state–local government interactions. Using a qualitative analytical approach based on constitutional analysis, institutional review, and secondary literature, the paper finds that Nigeria's IGR system remains largely centralized, undermining sub-national autonomy and effective service delivery. The study argues that strengthening cooperative federalism through constitutional reforms, fiscal decentralization, and institutional capacity building is essential for improving governance and development outcomes in Nigeria.

Keywords: Intergovernmental Relations, Federalism, Local Government Autonomy, Fiscal Federalism, Nigeria.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Intergovernmental relations (IGR) describe the patterns of interaction, cooperation, and conflict among different levels of government within a political system. In federal systems, such relations are fundamental to governance because responsibilities are constitutionally divided among levels of government, requiring coordination for effective policy implementation. Nigeria's federal arrangement, comprising federal, state, and local governments, was adopted to manage diversity, promote national unity, and enhance administrative efficiency.

However, since independence, Nigeria's federal system has faced recurring challenges related to power centralization, fiscal imbalance, and weak local government autonomy. These challenges have significantly shaped intergovernmental relations, often resulting in policy inconsistency, duplication of functions, and poor service delivery. This study examines the structure and functioning of intergovernmental relations in Nigeria, focusing on the

dynamics among the three tiers of government and their implications for governance and development.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Concept of Intergovernmental Relations

Intergovernmental relations refer to the formal and informal interactions between governmental units operating at different levels within a state. These interactions include policy coordination, fiscal transfers, administrative supervision, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Scholars argue that effective IGR enhances governance by promoting collaboration, accountability, and efficient resource utilization (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003).

IGR is particularly significant in developing federal states, where disparities in capacity and resources among sub-national governments necessitate cooperation and coordination.

2.2 Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations

Federalism is a system of government in which power is constitutionally divided between a central authority and constituent units. Classical federalism emphasizes autonomy and non-interference, while contemporary federal systems increasingly adopt cooperative federalism, where governments share responsibilities and collaborate in policy implementation.

Nigeria's federal system, while constitutionally federal, operates in practice as a highly centralized system. This centralization has profound implications for intergovernmental relations, often generating conflicts between autonomy and control.

3. Constitutional Basis of Intergovernmental Relations in Nigeria

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) provides the legal foundation for intergovernmental relations.

3.1 Legislative and Functional Allocation of Powers

The Constitution divides powers into:

- Exclusive Legislative List, reserved for the federal government;
- Concurrent Legislative List, shared between federal and state governments;
- Residual powers, implicitly reserved for states.

Local governments are constitutionally recognized but placed under state supervision, creating a structurally subordinate relationship. This arrangement has generated debates over whether local governments function as genuine federating units or administrative extensions of state governments.

3.2 Institutional Mechanisms for Intergovernmental Relations

Several constitutional and administrative institutions facilitate IGR in Nigeria:

- National Council of States: Provides policy direction on national issues affecting federal and state governments.
- National Economic Council (NEC): Coordinates economic planning and policy implementation among governments.
- Revenue Mobilization, Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC): Advises on revenue allocation and fiscal matters.
- Joint State–Local Government Account Committees: Manage local government allocations.
- Despite their existence, these institutions often lack enforcement power and are vulnerable to political manipulation.

4. Federal–State Relations in Nigeria

Federal–state relations in Nigeria are characterized by a combination of cooperation and competition. While states are constitutionally recognized as federating units, the federal government exercises considerable control over critical policy areas such as security, fiscal resources, and macroeconomic planning.

Federal intervention programs in education, healthcare, agriculture, and infrastructure demonstrate cooperative IGR in practice. However, disputes over resource control, state policing, and constitutional interpretation frequently strain federal–state relations. These tensions highlight the imbalance in Nigeria's federal arrangement and the dominance of the federal government.

5. State–Local Government Relations

Local governments are constitutionally intended to serve as the third tier of government, responsible for grassroots development and citizen participation. In practice, however, local governments operate under extensive state control.

State governments influence local government administration through: Control of local government elections, Oversight of finances via the Joint Account system, Appointment or removal of local government officials. This dominance has undermined local government autonomy and weakened the effectiveness of intergovernmental relations at the grassroots level.

6. Fiscal Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations

Fiscal relations are central to intergovernmental dynamics in Nigeria. Revenue allocation from the Federation Account remains the primary source of funding for states and local governments. The heavy reliance on federally collected revenues particularly oil revenue has limited fiscal autonomy and accountability at sub-national levels.

The Joint State–Local Government Account, although constitutionally established, has been widely criticized for enabling state governments to divert local government funds. This practice has weakened service delivery and eroded public confidence in local governance.

7. Challenges of Intergovernmental Relations in Nigeria

Several interrelated factors undermine effective intergovernmental relations:

- Excessive Centralization of Power – Federal dominance limits sub-national autonomy.
- Weak Local Government Autonomy – Constitutional ambiguities enable state interference.

- Fiscal Imbalance and Dependency – Overreliance on federal allocations discourages revenue innovation.
- Political Interference – Partisan politics often override cooperative governance.
- Institutional Capacity Constraints – Weak administrative capacity at state and local levels.

8. Implications for Governance and Development

Weak intergovernmental relations have adverse implications for governance in Nigeria. Poor coordination leads to policy inconsistency, duplication of efforts, and inefficient service delivery. The inability of local governments to function effectively undermines grassroots development, while federal dominance weakens democratic accountability.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve intergovernmental relations in Nigeria, the study recommends:

- Constitutional reform to clarify functional responsibilities and strengthen local government autonomy.
- Fiscal decentralization to enhance sub-national revenue generation.
- Strengthening IGR institutions with clearer mandates and enforcement mechanisms.
- Capacity building for state and local governments.
- Promotion of cooperative federalism through structured intergovernmental dialogue.

10. CONCLUSION

Intergovernmental relations remain a critical yet problematic component of Nigeria's federal system. While constitutional provisions recognize three tiers of government, practical realities reveal persistent centralization and institutional weaknesses. Addressing

these challenges is essential for improving governance efficiency, democratic accountability, and sustainable development in Nigeria.

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