

Conceptual dynamics of intergovernmental relations in a unitary nation: The case of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This paper is a critical examination of the conceptual differentiation of intergovernmental relations (IGR). The paper distils the conceptual boundaries of IGR and disqualifies classical scholarship that restricts the study, conception and application of the term to federal nations only, either as a conceptual synonym of federalism or a term applicable in articulating the relations between federal and state governments. The paper argues that classical scholars of the field restricted the conceptual breath of IGR to the philosophical traces of federalism while presenting a nebulous picture that such relations are not found in unitary nations. Such restriction has presented a theoretical liability to the field of IGR by confining its depth below its actual stretches as a field of reasoned discourse. This paper is based on twenty qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with key informants using the purposive sampling technique. Respondents were drawn from Ministers of State for Provincial Affairs, Members of Parliament, the judiciary, academia, civil society, permanent secretaries in government ministries and mayors of municipalities and city councils. The findings of the paper unequivocally places that IGR is a universal concept that extends beyond the dogmatic debate of federalism and unitarism as such relations are to be found wherever two or more governments interact in the development and execution of public policies and programmes. The necessity of IGR therefore cuts across political systems to address the disputes, interdependencies and spillover effects resulting from constitutional overlaps in all forms of governmental interaction.

Keywords: intergovernmental relations, decentralisation, unitary nation, federal nation

Introduction

The relationship between government jurisdictions, particularly as it pertains to the exercise of 'defined' power has elevated the critical role IGR should play in modern day governments and politics (Mathebula 2001). The level of attention has resulted in a scholarly definitional contest on the conceptual breath of IGR and its application in unitary nations. Classical scholars and students of federalism have argued that IGR as a concept is usually associated with federal administration systems where relations between the federal and the state governments are formally spelt out in the Constitution (De Villiers, 2012). In relation to this, a fundamental question has been raised to determine whether IGR are a discourse of federalism with little relevance to unitary nations (Ile 2007). This is important because, the leadership of a country, unitary or federal, has to contend with the varied relationships between organs of government in an effort to achieve governmental goals. In other words, a country may be unitary in nature but have federal characteristics and vice-visa in terms of the implementation of governmental systems. This paper strongly argues that IGR exists both in federal and unitary nations and the paradigm that IGR is only associated with the federal system should be strictly discarded.

History and dimensions of the study of intergovernmental relations

According to Wright (1978: 1), 'in comet-like fashion', the concept or phrase IGR has entered the orbit of common political discourse and enjoys extensive usage among scholars and policy-makers of various types and persuasion. Wight (1978: 2) further traced the earliest usage of the terminology, IGR to Professor Clyde F. Snider's writing in 1937 on county and township government in the U.S. Wright's engagements with Professor