



RESEARCH ARTICLE

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND THE MAKING OF PUBLIC POLICIES IN THE NIGERIAN FEDERATION: COOPERATION AND CONFLICT AMONG THE TIERS AND UNITS OF GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper appraised the implications of Nigeria's federal system for public policy formulation. It is a public knowledge that Federalism assumes that each tier of government is responsible for designing and implementing policies within its jurisdiction, while recognizing that higher levels may enact policies binding on lower ones. Through the qualitative method utilizing the secondary sources for data collection and contentment analysis for the analysis of data collected, the study examined how policies are made within Nigeria's democratic and federal environment, considering both the processes and the broader political context shaping decision-making. Beyond analyzing the institutional environment, the paper analyzed how federalism influences policy outcomes and how policy processes affect the stability of the federation. Anchored in the Systems theoretical framework, the study cited examples from all tiers of government, particularly the federal level, which integrates inputs from actors across the federation. Findings show that Nigeria's policy-making process reflects both cooperation and conflict among levels of government. Policies formulated through adherence to due process tend to enjoy legitimacy and acceptance, while the neglect of procedures often fuels tension, resistance, and implementation challenges. The paper concludes that sustained cooperation, rather than conflict, remains critical for effective and democratic policy-making in Nigeria.

Keywords: Public policy, democracy, federalism, governance, policy making process

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INTRODUCTION

Democratic governance and the making of public policies in federal systems have long been subjects of debate in political science, particularly in states with diverse sociocultural, economic, and political landscapes such as Nigeria. As a federal state, Nigeria is constitutionally structured into three tiers of government the federal, state, and local governments, each possessing constitutionally guaranteed roles in governance and policy formulation. However, in practice, the dynamics of cooperation and conflict among these tiers have significantly shaped the processes and outcomes of public policy-making. This is especially true in Nigeria where a blend of institutional arrangements, political interests, and socio-ethnic pluralism converge to influence how policies are designed, implemented, and contested (Jinadu, 2019).

Democratic governance refers to the exercise of political power within the framework of democratic principles, institutions, and processes that ensure participation, representation, accountability, and transparency in public affairs (Diamond, 2008). It goes beyond the existence of democratic structures, extending to how these structures are operationalized in fostering inclusive decision-making and policy implementation. In federations such as Nigeria, democratic governance is closely tied to the principles of federalism, where power is constitutionally shared between central and subnational governments. This structure is intended to promote cooperation among tiers of government while providing mechanisms for resolving inevitable conflicts that arise in policy formulation and governance (Elaigwu, 2013).

The making of public policy is a critical component of governance in any state. Public policy can be understood as the authoritative allocation of values through laws, regulations, programs, and decisions by government institutions to address societal needs (Dye, 2017). In federal states, the process of policy-making is often complex because authority is not concentrated at the center but shared among different levels of government. This complexity is particularly evident in Nigeria where, despite constitutional provisions outlining the responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments, overlapping jurisdictions and competing political interests frequently create tensions. For instance, policies on education, health, agriculture, and fiscal management often involve multiple tiers of government, resulting in both cooperative arrangements and intergovernmental disputes (Suberu, 2001).

Historically, Nigeria's federal system has evolved through processes marked by colonial legacies, military interventions, and constitutional engineering. The amalgamation of 1914 and subsequent colonial administrative arrangements laid the groundwork for a centralised system of governance, which the post-independence federal constitution attempted to decentralize (Osaghae, 1998). However, military rule from 1966 to 1979 and again from 1983 to 1999 entrenched a highly centralized federal structure, eroding the autonomy of



subnational units. This centralization has continued to shape the dynamics of policy-making, as the federal government retains significant control over vital policy areas such as resource allocation, security, and education, often at the expense of state and local governments (Suberu, 2010).

Despite Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, the tension between cooperation and conflict among the tiers of government has remained central to policy-making. Democratic governance, ideally, should encourage collaboration across federal units to ensure inclusiveness and responsiveness in policy decisions. However, the Nigerian experience has been characterized by competitive federalism, struggles over revenue allocation, disputes over policy jurisdiction, and the influence of ethnic and regional politics (Ikeanyibe, 2016). For example, the frequent conflicts between federal and state governments over issues such as state police, control of natural resources, and local government autonomy highlight the inherent contradictions of Nigeria's federal arrangement.

Nevertheless, cooperation has also been a notable feature in Nigerian federalism, particularly in areas that require joint efforts for effectiveness. Health policy, for instance, has seen multi-tiered collaboration, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic when federal and state governments coordinated efforts in public health response. Similarly, national educational policies, agricultural programs, and infrastructural development often necessitate collaborative frameworks among the three levels of government (Arowolo, 2011). These cooperative mechanisms demonstrate that, while conflict is prevalent, intergovernmental collaboration remains essential for effective governance and public policy delivery.

The Nigerian case underscores the inherent tension in federal democracies between the need for unity and the imperative of diversity. On the one hand, federalism is designed to accommodate Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multicultural character by granting autonomy to subnational governments. On the other hand, the need for national cohesion and centralized policy direction often compels the federal government to assert dominance, sometimes in ways that undermine democratic principles and subnational autonomy (Suberu, 2001). Thus, the making of public policies in Nigeria is not merely an administrative exercise but also a political contest shaped by the interplay of cooperation and conflict.

Furthermore, the challenges of corruption, weak institutions, and political clientelism compound the difficulties of democratic governance and public policy-making in Nigeria. Corruption often distorts policy priorities, while weak institutions fail to provide effective checks and balances in intergovernmental relations. Political clientelism, in turn, encourages patronage-based policies that reflect elite interests rather than the collective good (Ibeanu, 2008). These governance deficits highlight the importance of strengthening democratic institutions, promoting intergovernmental dialogue, and fostering a culture of accountability and inclusiveness in Nigerian federalism.



Significance of the Study

This study of democratic governance and the making of public policies in Nigeria is significant for several reasons. First, it provides insights into how federal arrangements interact with democratic governance in shaping policy outcomes. Second, it highlights the ways in which cooperation and conflict among tiers of government impact service delivery and national development. Third, it contributes to broader debates on federalism, democratic consolidation, and governance in Africa by using Nigeria as a case study. In doing so, it underscores the need for reforms that enhance cooperative federalism while addressing the structural and institutional factors that fuel intergovernmental conflicts.

Thus, the introduction of this study situates democratic governance and policy-making within the broader framework of Nigerian federalism. It establishes that while cooperation among tiers of government is critical for effective policy-making, conflict is equally inevitable given Nigeria's historical, political, and institutional realities. The balance between cooperation and conflict, therefore, remains central to understanding the dynamics of governance and public policy in Nigeria. The subsequent sections of the study will explore these issues in greater detail, analyzing the conceptual foundations, historical trajectories, and practical experiences of democratic governance and policy-making in the Nigerian federation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship on democratic governance and policy making in federal systems emphasizes how authority is dispersed and how intergovernmental relations (IGR) shape policy choices, implementation, and accountability (Watts, 1999). In Nigeria, a constitutionally enshrined federation with a powerful federal center and 36 states plus the Federal Capital Territory and 774 local governments, the dynamics of cooperation and conflict among tiers and units of government remain central to democratic performance and public policy outcomes (Elaigwu, 2007). This review synthesizes key strands of the literature under four themes: (a) conceptual lenses on democratic governance and federalism; (b) Nigeria's IGR architecture and policy process; (c) cooperative mechanisms and policy arenas; and (d) recurrent conflicts, their drivers, and management approaches. It closes by highlighting gaps and directions for future research relevant to Nigeria's evolving policy challenges.

“Democratic governance” is typically framed as the exercise of authority through accountable, participatory, and rule-bound institutions that deliver public goods while protecting rights (Hyden & Court, 2002). In federations, the dispersion of authority is formalized as constitutional division of powers, shared rule and self-rule, and intergovernmental coordination (Elazar, 1987). Classic federal theory Wheare's (1963) “coordinate authorities” foregrounds juridical allocation of competences, while later work



stresses fiscal and administrative interdependence that makes negotiated coordination inevitable.

Policy-process scholarship contributes two additional insights. First, the policy agenda is shaped by windows of opportunity, policy entrepreneurs, and problem–solution coupling (Kingdon, 1995). Second, policy change is often incremental and negotiated among coalitions across levels of government (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Implementation studies underline how multi-layered systems can multiply veto points and slippage (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), making intergovernmental cooperation a functional necessity. In practice, federal policy making is neither purely hierarchical nor purely market-like; it is a networked, “polycentric” arrangement in which multiple centers of decision making interact under a shared constitutional umbrella (Ostrom, 1990).

Nigeria’s 1999 Constitution structures powers across three tiers—federal, state, and local, but the fiscal and functional distribution is asymmetrical, favoring the federal government (Elaigwu, 2007). Exclusive and Concurrent Legislative Lists concentrate core macro-functions at the center (defense, currency, external affairs), while states share competencies in education, health, agriculture, and infrastructure; local governments are assigned primary education, primary health care, markets, and sanitation, typically under state oversight (Eme & Emeh, 2012).

The intergovernmental arena is institutionalized through devices such as the National Council of State, National Economic Council, and sectoral councils of state commissioners and federal ministers (Eme & Emeh, 2012). Constitutionally mandated revenue allocation depends on the Federation Account, with vertical and horizontal sharing formulas that have evolved amid contestation over derivation, population, equality of states, and social development indices (Suberu, 2001). State–local relations are mediated by State Joint Local Government Accounts, a recurrent flashpoint for autonomy debates and service-delivery performance (Ikeanyibe, 2016).

Empirically, the Nigerian federation is a case of “executive federalism”: presidents, governors, and their cabinets dominate intergovernmental bargaining, often overshadowing legislatures and civil society in routine IGR (Elaigwu, 2007). This executive-centered dynamic can accelerate decision making under crisis but may blunt deliberation and accountability, especially where party coherence subordinates subnational preferences (Suberu, 2001).

Despite well-documented tensions, the literature identifies several cooperative pathways:

i) Fiscal federalism and conditional transfers. Federal block and conditional grants support national priorities (e.g., primary health care, basic education) whose implementation rests



with states and local governments. When transfers are rule-bound and predictable, they align incentives and reduce coordination failures. Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) and National Primary Health Care Development initiatives illustrate conditionality and matching requirements that encourage joint financing and standards setting (Ikeanyibe, 2016).

ii). Intergovernmental policy councils and technical committees. Sector councils (e.g., health, education, works) convene federal and state bureaucracies to harmonize guidelines, standards, and data protocols, enabling policy diffusion and shared learning (Agranoff, 2001). These councils have been instrumental in vaccination campaigns, public health surveillance, and curriculum reforms, where synchronized standards matter for outcomes (Ikeanyibe, 2016).

iii). Networked service delivery and public–public partnerships. Polycentric governance emphasizes overlapping jurisdictions and collaborative arrangements among ministries, departments, and agencies across tiers. In Nigeria, federal agencies often co-implement with state counterparts, e.g., road corridors where trunk routes connect to state arterials—reducing duplication and leveraging economies of scale (Elaigwu, 2007).

iv). Judicial review as a coordination device. Courts arbitrate competence conflicts and clarify concurrency boundaries, thereby stabilizing expectations even when decisions are politically contentious. Jurisprudence on resource control, taxation authority, and local government autonomy has periodically re-set bargaining baselines in IGR (Elaigwu, 2007).

v). Data and performance frameworks. The spread of national indicator sets and joint monitoring platforms, particularly in health and education—has promoted problem definition convergence and facilitated peer comparison among states, a soft tool for cooperative competition (Hyden & Court, 2002).

Several literatures converge on enduring fault lines that complicate democratic governance and policy coherence:

Vertical fiscal imbalance and soft budget constraints: The center controls most buoyant revenues (notably oil rents historically), while states and local governments depend on transfers. This creates common-pool problems and weakens local revenue effort, undermining accountability to citizens. Soft budget expectations can induce overspending and bailout lobbying, distorting subnational policy priorities (Watts, 1999).

Ambiguity in concurrent functions: Overlapping mandates in education, health, agriculture, urban planning, and social protection produce duplication and turf battles, especially where enabling legislation is unclear or unfunded. Implementation studies note that duplication amplifies transaction costs and slows delivery (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973).



State–local relations and autonomy debates: The literature repeatedly highlights political control of local councils by state executives, constrained fiscal autonomy via joint accounts, irregular elections, and administrative capture, with knock-on effects for frontline services (Ikeanyibe, 2016). Democratic accountability at the local level is thereby diluted, and policy responsiveness suffers.

Resource control and derivation disputes: Conflicts over revenue allocation—especially derivation percentages and the treatment of onshore/offshore production—have historically mobilized subnational coalitions, reshaping center–periphery bargaining (Elaigwu, 2007). Episodes of contention have spurred constitutional litigation as well as ad hoc political settlements.

Partisan alignment and intergovernmental bargaining: Party congruence across tiers can lubricate policy coordination, but may also centralize control and mute subnational innovation; incongruence can sharpen policy competition but also provoke withholding or politicization of transfers (Elaigwu, 2007). The Nigerian experience contains both patterns, with alternating cycles of alignment and fragmentation affecting social sector programs and infrastructure rollouts.

Capacity asymmetries and bureaucratic fragmentation: Variance in administrative capacity across states and local governments—planning, procurement, M&E—shapes their bargaining leverage and implementation performance (Ikeanyibe, 2016). Capacity gaps often lead to recentralization tendencies as the center seeks uniformity, sometimes at the expense of local adaptation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Political Systems theory. This theory views public policy as the response of a political system to demands arising from its environment. The political systems theory, developed by David Easton (1965), provides a useful analytical framework for understanding democratic governance and the making of public policies within federal systems such as Nigeria's. Easton conceptualized politics as a “system of interactions” through which authoritative allocations of values are made and implemented within a society. The political system, according to him, operates through the transformation of inputs (demands and supports from the environment) into outputs (policies and decisions), which then generate feedback from the society. This cyclical process ensures the continuity and adaptability of governance. Applying this model to Nigeria, with its federal and democratic structure, reveals the interplay of cooperation and conflict among the tiers and units of government in shaping policy outcomes.



In Nigeria's democratic federalism, inputs into the policy process emanate from a variety of sources such as the citizens, interest groups, political parties, civil society organizations, and the media. These actors articulate demands ranging from improved wages, infrastructural development, resource control, and education reforms to security concerns. They also provide support in the form of legitimacy, participation in elections, and compliance with governmental directives (Ikelegbe, 2013). For instance, demands for a new national minimum wage in 2000, 2019, and 2023 reflected organized labour's pressure on the federal government to respond to worsening living conditions. Similarly, demands from the Niger Delta for resource control and environmental justice have influenced federal policies and even led to the establishment of interventionist institutions like the Niger Delta Development Commission (Omotola, 2007).

The federal system complicates these inputs because demands are directed not only to the federal government but also to state and local governments. Citizens in Lagos, for example, may demand mass transit solutions from the state government, while those in rural areas may seek agricultural support from their local governments. This multiplicity of entry points often creates overlapping or conflicting pressures on the different levels of government, thereby shaping both cooperation and conflict in governance (Suberu, 2001).

The conversion process, where demands are transformed into binding decisions, is the core of Easton's systems theory. In Nigeria, this process occurs within the formal institutions of government—the executive, legislature, judiciary, and the bureaucracy—each operating at federal, state, and local levels. However, because Nigeria practices a federal system, the conversion of demands into policies is marked by competition over jurisdiction and resources. Cooperation is evident in instances where the federal and state governments jointly address national challenges. For example, the 2014 National Health Act required both federal and state collaboration in financing and implementing health services. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, federal and state governments coordinated on public health directives, albeit with some conflicts over lockdown enforcement (Adebisi et al., 2020).

Conflicts arise when tiers of government contest authority. The controversies over minimum wage legislation illustrate this. While the federal government enacted a uniform minimum wage, many states resisted implementation on the grounds of fiscal incapacity, arguing for labour matters to fall under the residual list of state competencies. This tension demonstrates the clash between the centralizing tendencies of federal policy-making and the autonomy aspirations of state governments (Okamgba, 2025).

The outputs of the Nigerian political system are public policies, laws, and regulations, which often carry implications for all tiers of government. For instance, federal fuel subsidy removal policies reverberate across the federation, influencing transportation costs, inflation, and social unrest at both state and local levels. Similarly, policies on security—such as the



establishment of regional security outfits like Amotekun in the Southwest, reflect subnational governments' responses to perceived inadequacies of federal security policy (Aborisade, 2021). Cooperation in policy outputs can be seen in joint fiscal arrangements, such as the Federation Account Allocation Committee (FAAC), which ensures revenue sharing across federal, state, and local governments. Yet, even here, conflict is persistent, with oil-producing states often demanding a greater share of revenue through the principle of derivation. This has sparked debates on restructuring and fiscal federalism (Suberu, 2010).

Feedback, an essential element of Easton's theory, plays a critical role in shaping the Nigerian policy process. Citizens, civil society groups, and political actors evaluate the effectiveness of policies and communicate their reactions through protests, media engagement, elections, or legal actions. For example, the fuel subsidy removals of 2012 and 2023 generated widespread protests and strikes, forcing government to reconsider aspects of its economic policies. Similarly, judicial interventions often arise from feedback, with courts arbitrating disputes between tiers of government over jurisdictional conflicts, such as revenue allocation disputes between the federal government and oil-producing states (Ojo, 2010). Feedback mechanisms highlight the adaptability of Nigeria's democratic federalism. When conflict arises, such as between federal authority and state autonomy, feedback often triggers constitutional interpretation or negotiation, ensuring system survival. However, weak institutions, corruption, and elite capture of the policy process sometimes distort feedback, leading to policy failures and loss of public trust (Ikeanyibe, 2013).

In view of the foregoing, the political systems theory provides a robust lens for analyzing democratic governance and public policy-making in Nigeria's federation. By conceptualizing governance as a cyclical process of inputs, conversion, outputs, and feedback, it highlights the complexity of cooperation and conflict among Nigeria's tiers and units of government. While cooperation ensures joint problem-solving and the pooling of resources, conflict reflects the struggles over power, autonomy, and resource distribution inherent in a federal democracy. Ultimately, the resilience of the Nigerian political system depends on its capacity to manage conflicts, strengthen institutions, and incorporate feedback into more responsive and inclusive policy-making.

Implications of Democratic Governance on Policy Making

The aggregate implication is that outcomes depend less on formal allocations of power than on how cooperative mechanisms and conflict-management tools are used in practice (Agranoff, 2001). Where councils meet regularly, data systems are interoperable, and conditional transfers are transparent and rule-bound, policy adoption and implementation improve. Conversely, opaque bargaining over revenue and mandates, weak local autonomy, and politicized appointments tend to undermine democratic accountability and service delivery (Hyden & Court, 2002).



Policy-process frameworks help explain these patterns. Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams suggest that "focusing events" (e.g., fiscal shocks, epidemics) can catalyze temporary alignment across tiers, opening windows for reform. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) predicts that coalitions spanning federal ministries, state agencies, and civil society can drive medium-term policy change where shared beliefs and technical expertise persist through political turnovers. Lindblom's (1959) incrementalism captures how many Nigerian reforms—revenue sharing formulas, health and education standards—evolve through small negotiated steps rather than sweeping redesigns.

The literature points to several levers for strengthening cooperative federalism while managing conflict:

- i. **Clarifying mandates and aligning financing.** Unbundling concurrent functions with detailed schedules, costed standards, and joint financing rules reduces ambiguity and unfunded mandates (Eme & Emeh, 2012). Where competencies remain shared, memoranda of understanding and intergovernmental compacts can formalize roles.
- ii. **Rules-based intergovernmental transfers.** Transparent, formula-driven transfers—combined with matching requirements and performance-based components—can incentivize subnational effort and reduce politicization (Khemani, 2006). Stabilization funds help smooth volatility without entrenching soft budgets.
- iii. **Strengthening state–local accountability.** Elected local councils, predictable transfers, and direct access to capital grants—paired with robust audit and M&E—are associated with better frontline delivery (Hyden & Court, 2002).
- iv. **Institutionalizing policy councils and shared data.** Regularized sector councils with published communiqués, shared dashboards, and interoperable data architectures support coordinated planning and peer learning (Agranoff, 2001).
- v. **Judicial clarity and ADR in IGR.** Timely constitutional adjudication and complementary alternative dispute resolution mechanisms can de-escalate competence conflicts and stabilize expectations for investors and implementing agencies (Elaigwu, 2007).
- vi. **Capacity equalization.** Targeted technical assistance, pooled training academies, and peer-review mechanisms can mitigate subnational capacity gaps that otherwise trigger recentralization.

Nigeria's Public Policy Making Environment

Policy making cannot be adequately considered apart from the environment in which it takes place. In Nigeria, the single most important and most enduring policy environmental feature is the nation's federal system of government, which means that there are three arenas of policy making in the country at every point in time, namely, the federal, the states and the local government levels. Apart from federalism, other environmental factors are such



geographical characteristics as natural resources, climate and topography; demographical variables like population size, age distribution and spatial location; political culture; social structure; and the economic system (Anderson, 1979). Other countries become a significant part of the environment for foreign and defense policy and even a number of domestic policies.. These factors form the environment of public policy in every country.

Nigeria is endowed in terms of natural resources with large deposits of oil and gas, coal, tin, agricultural produce. In addition, the country has a generally clement weather, being in the tropical climatic zone. The country is similarly well endowed in human terms, with a large population of over 200 million people with a variety of manpower in numerous fields of human endeavour, majority of who fall within the working age bracket. Our economic system is more within the periphery of the international system, with its feature of vulnerability to the unfavourable cycles of economic stress. In fact, the present mass poverty in the land is a major factor in any policy formulation in the country presently.

Apart from the above, a most important environmental factor of public policy in Nigeria today is the democratic political system. Before transforming to a democracy, the country was under military rule, a feature which defined not only the policy making process in the country but also our federal system. Since the advent of democratic rule, a new environment of public policy making has taken root in the country. Democracy now means that the various organs of government- the executive, judiciary and legislature, as well as the bureaucracy are performing their constitutional roles in the policy process. It means that the various groups and other unofficial participants in the policy process can make their inputs into the various public policies that are made by the system. It also means that the various tiers of government can make policies for their jurisdictions without undue interference from other tiers. In effect, democracy redefined not only the policy making process in the country, but also our federal system itself.

Policy Making Process under the Federal System in Democratic Nigeria

In Nigeria, a federal democracy with three constitutionally recognized tiers of government— federal, state, and local, the making of public policies is shaped by interactions among institutions, actors, and interests across different levels. Policy making in Nigeria does not follow a linear, technical process but rather a complex interaction between official and unofficial actors embedded within pluralist and often fragmented governance structures (Elaigwu, 2007). This complexity arises from both federalism, which disperses authority across multiple tiers, and democracy, which introduces broad participation and competition.

Policy making is not carried out by a single institution; rather, it involves a network of actors who contribute to different stages of the process. Dye (2013) classify these actors into official



policy makers, who hold legal authority, and unofficial participants, who influence the process without direct decision-making powers.

Official policy makers include the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy (Anderson, 1979). Among these, the primary policy makers, the legislature, executive, and judiciary derive their powers directly from the Constitution and exercise direct authority in creating, approving, or reviewing public policy. For instance, the National Assembly enacts laws and approves budgets, the President and executive arm initiate and implement policies, while the judiciary interprets laws and adjudicates disputes over policy competences (Elaigwu, 2007).

The bureaucracy plays a critical role as a secondary policy-making body. Though it lacks independent constitutional authority, it supports formulation and implementation by providing technical expertise, drafting policy proposals, and overseeing administrative execution. In practice, bureaucrats exercise substantial discretion in interpreting and applying policies, thereby shaping outcomes (Starling, 2011).

Unofficial actors influence policy decisions despite lacking formal authority. These include interest groups, political parties, the media, and citizens. Interest groups lobby and mobilize resources to push for favorable policies, while political parties aggregate societal interests, mobilize electoral support, and influence the direction of government priorities (Woll, 1974). Citizens and civil society organizations contribute through advocacy, protests, or participation in consultations. For example, organized labor unions such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) have been decisive in minimum wage debates and fuel subsidy protests (Suberu, 2001). The interaction between official and unofficial actors produces public policy outcomes. In a pluralist democracy like Nigeria, this interplay is marked by bargaining, negotiation, and sometimes conflict, reflecting the diversity of societal interests.

CRITICAL ANALYSES AND DISCOURSES

Case Studies of Public Policy-Making in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Public policy-making in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has often reflected the dynamics of democratic governance in a federal system. The policy process at the federal level typically begins with the articulation of societal needs by relevant groups, political institutions, or government organs, especially the executive. These demands are subsequently translated into the policy agenda and forwarded to the legislature for consideration. The legislature, in turn, formulates proposals, sometimes after extensive consultation with stakeholders—which are then enacted into law. The President's assent finalizes the process, while the relevant ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) oversee implementation. This chain of activities underscores both the cooperative and conflictual dimensions of Nigeria's federal



arrangement, as federal, state, and local governments, alongside organized interest groups, contest or collaborate over policy outcomes (Anderson, 2011).

Two emblematic cases, the minimum wage policy and fuel price deregulation—illustrate how policy-making in the Fourth Republic has combined negotiation, executive pronouncements, legislative action, stakeholder contestation, and eventual compromise. These cases also highlight the recurrent tensions between different tiers of government, organized labour, and civil society in shaping the trajectory of public policies in Nigeria.

The Minimum Wage Policy

The minimum wage policy in Nigeria has historically symbolized both the responsiveness of the federal government to workers' demands and the persistent fiscal and political constraints facing subnational governments. For decades, organized labour, particularly the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), agitated for a “living wage” that would enable workers to cope with worsening poverty and inflationary pressures. Upon assumption of office in 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo pledged to improve workers' welfare and entered into negotiations with labour unions. This culminated in the announcement of a new national minimum wage on Workers' Day, May 1, 2000: ₦7,500 for federal workers and ₦5,500 for state workers (Fajana, 2000). The proposal was subsequently sent to the National Assembly and enacted into law.

However, while the federal government complied with the new wage structure, implementation at the subnational level proved problematic. Many states and local governments claimed inadequate fiscal capacity, arguing that the federal government had imposed the law without proper consultation or consideration of state revenues. For example, some governors publicly declared that they were placed in a “tight corner” as their budgets could not accommodate the sudden wage increase (Punch, June 13, 2000). Consequently, while federal workers received the stipulated wage, several states, local governments, and private sector employers either defaulted or paid selectively.

The issue of non-compliance resurfaced when the Minimum Wage Act, which mandated periodic review every five years, was largely ignored until 2019. The review raised the minimum wage to ₦30,000. Yet again, while the federal government complied, many states either defaulted or implemented partial adjustments, citing low internally generated revenue (IGR) and overdependence on federal allocations (Adebayo, 2019). In 2023, the wage was further revised to ₦70,000 with provisions for review every three years. Despite stricter enforcement measures and stipulated penalties for defaulters, reports indicate that numerous states, local governments, and even private businesses continue to either resist compliance or implement the law in breach (Okamgba, 2025).



The minimum wage saga illustrates how Nigeria's federal structure complicates policy implementation. While the federal government often seeks to legislate in the "national interest," states assert their fiscal autonomy and capacity limitations. The result has been recurrent conflicts between tiers of government and organized labour, with workers often caught in the middle. This policy case highlights the need for more collaborative fiscal federalism and revenue reform to ensure uniform compliance with wage laws across the federation.

Fuel Price Deregulation Policy

Another contentious case of federal policy-making with profound socio-economic and political implications is fuel price deregulation. Petroleum products, being central to Nigeria's economy, have historically been subsidized to cushion citizens from the volatility of global oil prices. However, successive governments have sought deregulation as a strategy to reduce subsidy costs, attract private sector investment, and encourage efficiency in the downstream oil sector (Ibietan & Ekhosuehi, 2013).

In June 2000, barely a year into the Fourth Republic, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), acting on behalf of the federal government, unilaterally announced new prices for major petroleum products. This came shortly after an earlier agreement with organized labour, in which the government had pledged not to increase prices without adequate consultation. The sudden price hike triggered widespread condemnation across the country, with civil society groups, labour unions, and even the two chambers of the National Assembly criticizing the move as insensitive to the plight of ordinary Nigerians (Suberu, 2001). The NLC, acting as the umbrella labour organization, issued a five-day ultimatum demanding a reversal of the price increases, failing which it threatened a nationwide strike. When negotiations with government proved unsuccessful, the NLC followed through, and a nationwide industrial action commenced. The strike paralyzed economic and social activities across the country. After about five days, the federal government was forced to partially reverse the price increases, reducing them to near their original levels (Oloruntoba, 2002).

This pattern of confrontation between labour and government over fuel price hikes has repeated itself over the years. Subsequent administrations—including those of Goodluck Jonathan in 2012 and Muhammadu Buhari in 2016 and 2020—attempted full or partial deregulation. Each attempt triggered widespread protests, strikes, and public opposition, forcing government into compromise measures such as palliatives, transportation subsidies, and wage adjustments (Ibeanu, Orji, & Iwuamadi, 2016). The most recent attempt under President Bola Tinubu in 2023 followed the outright removal of fuel subsidies, resulting in a sharp increase in prices, rising inflation, and significant hardship for Nigerians. While government argued that subsidy removal was necessary to stabilize the economy, labour



unions staged repeated strikes, negotiations, and protests, demonstrating the deep political sensitivity surrounding petroleum pricing in Nigeria (Okamgba, 2025).

The fuel price deregulation case underscores how policy-making in Nigeria often oscillates between economic rationality and political expediency. While the executive formulates and implements these policies, organized labour and civil society wield significant influence through strikes and protests. The legislature's role is often reactive, mediating between government and citizens, while subnational governments bear the political backlash as citizens confront them with demands for relief.

What these two case studies clearly demonstrate is that public policy-making in Nigeria follows a structured process, and once this process is circumvented or poorly executed, it creates tensions within the system. Such lapses not only generate obstacles in policy formulation and implementation but also produce ripple effects that can result in policy revision, modification, or outright non-implementation (Olaopa, 2014). This was evident in the New Minimum Wage Policy, where critical actors in federal policy-making, such as state governors and local government representatives—were excluded from the early stages of the process. The absence of their inputs during agenda setting and policy formulation complicated the subsequent stages of adoption and implementation, leaving several states unable or unwilling to comply with the wage increases (Okamgba, 2025).

Similarly, in the case of fuel price hikes, major stakeholders such as organized labour were sidelined during the early deliberations. This exclusion led to organized resistance and nationwide strikes, reflecting how the neglect of consensus-building in the policy cycle can undermine legitimacy and effectiveness (Suberu, 2001). In this instance, a seemingly casual pronouncement by the president became the trigger for widespread policy backlash, further highlighting the risks of unilateralism in a federal democracy. Although the federal government eventually took control of the matter, the social and economic hardships that followed the policy remained a source of public discontent (Aiyede, 2017).

A further example of this tension can be seen in the controversy surrounding the declaration of May 29 as “Democracy Day.” The unilateral decision by the President to designate this date as a national public holiday was met with resistance from both the National Assembly—many of whose members boycotted the celebrations, and from several southwestern states. These states instead declared June 12 as the authentic Democracy Day in honor of the annulled 1993 presidential election presumed to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola (Omilusi, 2018). This divergence once again underscores the challenge of harmonizing national policy with regional political and cultural realities within Nigeria's federal structure.

By contrast, when due procedures are followed, policy outcomes tend to attract broader acceptance and legitimacy. Policies that incorporate extensive consultation with key



stakeholders, allow for legislative debate, and accommodate the peculiarities of the various tiers of government often enjoy smoother adoption and implementation (Ikeanyibe, 2016). This suggests that adherence to the principles of democratic governance—participation, transparency, and accountability—remains crucial to policy effectiveness in the Nigerian federation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This paper examined the interactions between the federal environment and the making of public policies in Nigeria. We have seen that the process of public policy making is determined in the country as elsewhere by the environment under which such policies are made. We have seen that federalism is one of the most important 'environmental factors affecting policy making in Nigeria and its influence has led to either co-operation or conflict among policy actors in the country. By using an eclectic theoretical framework which combines the systems theory and the group theory, it has been possible to look at the above issues holistically, and to chart a way forward for good policy making in the country. The recommendations will produce a harmonious relationship between federalism and public policy making in Nigeria under a democratic regime.

Recommendations

The process of public policy making in Nigeria's federal system highlights the continuous need to strengthen cooperation and minimize conflicts among stakeholders. Effective collaboration ensures that policies are both acceptable during formulation and implementation, while also fostering public goodwill. This can be achieved through broad and inclusive consultations before policy announcements or legislative submissions. Such consultations should occur at multiple levels, including within ruling party caucuses, involving officials, elders, and leaders whose views must inform policy proposals. Similarly, executives and legislators should engage in informal meetings to harmonize perspectives before formal deliberations. At the national level, consultations between the President, Governors, National Assembly leaders, and respected societal figures are essential for policies with cross-cutting implications.

Equally important is strict adherence to federal principles, where consensus should guide policy decisions rather than majority dominance. The consent of affected groups must be secured to ensure smooth implementation, as arbitrary decisions often encounter resistance. Democratic principles must also be upheld, allowing minorities to voice opinions while preserving the majority's authority in matters of collective interest.



Furthermore, policies must be realistic and aligned with available resources. Embarking on projects driven by personal ambition rather than feasibility wastes scarce resources and results in abandoned projects. Instead, policies should be guided by clear implementation projections, with only viable initiatives undertaken. Leaders must exercise the courage to discard unworkable projects rather than pursuing them for political optics. Finally, policies should be subject to continuous evaluation and feedback mechanisms, enabling adjustments or revisions when necessary. Through these measures—consultation, consensus, realism, and accountability—policy making in Nigeria can become more cooperative, effective, and responsive to societal needs.

Competing Interest

The authors have declared that no conflicting exist in this study.

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