

ABSTRACT

Nigeria's federalism, though constitutionally designed to accommodate diversity and promote shared prosperity, has persistently failed to deliver effective governance, equitable service delivery, or lasting national cohesion. Excessive centralisation of power and resources, weak subnational institutions, overlapping jurisdictions, and poor management of ethno-religious pluralism have deepened citizen distrust, widened regional inequalities, and fuelled recurring demands for restructuring. By contrast, Canada's federal system illustrates the transformative potential of mature federal practice, where robust provincial autonomy, strong institutions, predictable fiscal equalisation, and cooperative intergovernmental mechanisms have sustained political stability, inclusive development, and social harmony across linguistic, cultural, and regional divides. This comparative study analyses the structural dichotomies and operational convergences between Canadian and Nigerian federalism. Drawing on institutional theory and fiscal federalism frameworks, it highlights how Canada coordinates responses to major challenges through inclusive dialogue and flexible federal-provincial partnerships, while Nigeria's highly centralised approach often exacerbates subnational distress and public disillusionment. The paper argues that Nigeria can re-imagine its federal arrangement by institutionalising inclusive national dialogue, advancing genuine fiscal decentralisation, strengthening cooperative intergovernmental relations, and adopting culturally sensitive policies—thereby transforming federalism from a source of tension into a powerful instrument for citizen welfare, social cohesion, and resilient nation-building.

Keywords: *Canada, cooperative governance, federalism, fiscal decentralization, nation-building, Nigeria, post-pandemic recovery.*

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's federal system, which formally came into operation in 1954 under the Lyttleton Constitution, was intended to balance regional autonomy with national unity. In reality, however, it has often intensified ethnic tensions, widened regional inequalities, and strained institutional capacity. Efforts to create additional states to accommodate minority interests have sometimes fueled competition over resources and political influence, resulting in uneven access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Moreover, centralized fiscal control and politically influenced revenue allocation have limited states' ability to meet local needs, fostering public distrust and reinforcing the perception that the system primarily benefits political elites (Nkoro & Otto, 2023; Oklobia & Mahmud, 2024).

In contrast, Canada demonstrates how federalism can be a mechanism for stability, inclusivity, and development. Established through voluntary union and compromise (British North America Act, 1867), Canadian federalism balances provincial autonomy with national cohesion. Provinces enjoy fiscal independence, strong social programs, and effective public services, while intergovernmental councils, judicial oversight, and cooperative mechanisms ensure smooth coordination and conflict resolution (Dinan, 2025; Caro & Romero, 2022). Canadians benefit from universal healthcare, quality education, bilingualism, multicultural protections, and equitable resource distribution. This combination of institutional strength, fiscal fairness, and inclusive governance highlights the potential

of federalism to enhance citizens' welfare and social integration.

This study aims to identify lessons that Nigeria can learn from Canada's federal experience. By enhancing institutional capacity, promoting fiscal decentralization, encouraging cooperative intergovernmental relations, and integrating cultural inclusiveness into governance, Nigeria has the potential to transform federalism from a source of tension into a driver of nation-building, social cohesion, and resilient governance—especially in the post-pandemic context. Canada's example demonstrates that when federalism is effectively implemented, it can reconcile diversity, improve public service delivery, and strengthen citizens' trust, ultimately fostering a more stable and unified nation.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Federalism

Federalism, according to K. C. Wheare (1963), is a system of government in which power is constitutionally divided between central and regional governments, each being independent and coordinate. It aims to balance unity and diversity by allowing subnational governments to address local needs while participating in national governance.

However, as Anderson (2020) and Watts (2008) emphasize, the success of federalism depends not only on the constitution but also on the strength of institutions, mutual trust, and cooperative political culture. Institutional theorists such as Olowu (2019) similarly note

that federalism works best when leaders and institutions uphold accountability, inclusiveness, and dialogue. Federalism is not just a legal framework but a living practice that must adapt to changing social and political realities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Institutional Theory and Fiscal Federalism Theory, both of which explain how structures, behaviors, and fiscal arrangements influence federal governance and citizens' welfare. Institutional Theory, propounded by March and Olsen (1984), posits that formal institutions (such as constitutions, laws, and intergovernmental bodies) and informal institutions (like norms, conventions, and political culture) shape actors' behavior, governance outcomes, and policy effectiveness. Strong institutions provide predictable rules, reduce conflicts, and enhance accountability, directly impacting citizens' access to services and trust in government.

In practice, Institutional Theory helps explain why federalism succeeds in Canada but struggles in Nigeria. Canada's robust institutions facilitate intergovernmental cooperation, transparent decision-making, and efficient service delivery, allowing provinces to respond effectively to citizens' needs in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social welfare (Dinan, 2025). In contrast, Nigeria's weak or fragmented institutions, combined with central dominance and politicized decision-making, result in inefficiency, poor service delivery, and citizen dissatisfaction (Nkoro & Otto, 2023; Oklobia & Mahmud, 2024). The strength of this

theory lies in its focus on how institutional structures and norms influence governance outcomes, making it ideal for analyzing the successes and challenges of federalism in diverse societies.

Fiscal Federalism Theory, propounded by Musgrave (1959) and Oates (1972), emphasizes that dividing taxing and spending powers among levels of government can achieve efficiency, equity, and economic stability. Well-designed fiscal arrangements empower subnational governments to address local needs while maintaining national cohesion. In Canada, provinces generate revenue and receive equalization payments and coordinated transfers, enabling them to fund public services, reduce regional inequalities, and respond to citizens' welfare needs effectively (Caro & Romero, 2022). In Nigeria, centralization of resources—especially oil revenue—and politically influenced revenue-sharing formulas restrict state autonomy, reduce service quality, and exacerbate regional disparities (Nkoro & Otto, 2023; Oklobia & Mahmud, 2024).

By combining Institutional Theory and Fiscal Federalism Theory, this study explains both structural and fiscal reasons behind the successes and challenges of federalism in Canada and Nigeria. Institutional Theory highlights the role of robust structures and norms in shaping governance outcomes, while Fiscal Federalism Theory emphasizes equitable resource distribution and state autonomy. Together, they provide a practical lens to understand how reforms in institutions and fiscal arrangements can directly improve citizens' welfare, reduce conflicts, and strengthen nation-building, offering

actionable lessons for Nigeria in the post-pandemic era.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, focusing on how federal structures in Canada and Nigeria affect governance and citizens' welfare. Data were collected primarily from secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and credible online publications, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of federalism in both countries. Recent studies by Dinan (2025), Nkoro and Otto (2023), and Oklobia and Mahmud (2024) were consulted to provide up-to-date insights into institutional effectiveness, fiscal arrangements, and intergovernmental relations.

By analyzing these sources comparatively, the study identifies how differences in institutional strength, fiscal autonomy, and cooperative mechanisms influence the delivery of essential services, social cohesion, and citizen trust. Thematic analysis was applied to highlight key dichotomies, convergences, and lessons for Nigeria, emphasizing practical strategies for improving governance, reducing inequalities, and strengthening nation-building in the post-pandemic era. This approach ensures that the study does not just examine abstract structures but focuses on the real-life implications of federalism for citizens' daily experiences and welfare.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CANADIAN AND NIGERIAN FEDERALISM

Canada's federalism emerged through negotiation, consent, and compromise, particularly with the British North America Act of 1867, which united provinces while respecting regional identities and interests (Simeon & Conway, 2001; Dinan, 2025). Provinces were granted autonomy over key sectors such as education, healthcare, and resource management, allowing them to respond effectively to citizens' needs and local priorities. This cooperative approach fostered social cohesion, political stability, and public trust, ensuring that diverse communities could coexist within a unified system while enjoying tangible benefits in their daily lives. Over time, Canada's federal institutions adapted to new challenges, including economic development, healthcare expansion, and crisis management, demonstrating a flexible and citizen-focused governance model.

Nigeria formally began operating a federal system in 1954, under the Lyttleton Constitution, which granted substantial autonomy to the regions while maintaining a central government for national affairs (Nkoro & Otto, 2023; Oklobia & Mahmud, 2024). This federal arrangement evolved from earlier colonial structures, beginning with the 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates. Frequent military interventions, centralization of power, and politicized resource allocation undermined the system, resulting in uneven service delivery, regional disparities, and recurring ethnic tensions. The creation of additional states, intended to manage diversity, often exacerbated divisions

and intensified political competition, highlighting the challenges of a federal system that exists more on paper than in practice.

By comparing these historical trajectories, it becomes clear that the origins and evolution of federalism significantly shape citizens' experiences, governance effectiveness, and interregional relations. Canada's model demonstrates how voluntary agreements, institutional strength, and inclusive policies can benefit citizens, whereas Nigeria's centralization and weak institutional frameworks have constrained the federal system's capacity to deliver services and foster national unity. Understanding these histories provides a foundation for identifying practical lessons Nigeria can adopt to strengthen nation-building and improve everyday life for its citizens.

DICHOTOMIES BETWEEN CANADIAN AND NIGERIAN FEDERALISM

A major difference lies in historical foundations. Canada's federation arose through voluntary union and negotiation, fostering trust, compromise, and institutional cooperation (Dinan, 2025). Citizens benefit from clear divisions of power and coordinated policies that ensure services reach communities efficiently. In contrast, Nigeria's federation was largely imposed during colonial rule, merging diverse regions without full consent. This created a legacy of mistrust, ethnic tension, and regional rivalry, which affects citizens' access to quality healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Nkoro & Otto, 2023).

Constitutional design and power distribution also differ. In Canada, provinces have autonomy in education, healthcare, and local development, allowing them to meet regional needs while cooperating with the federal government (Caro & Romero, 2022). In Nigeria, the federal government dominates over critical areas such as oil revenue, defense, and fiscal allocation, limiting states' capacity to provide services and respond to citizens' concerns (Nkoro & Otto, 2023).

Fiscal arrangements and intergovernmental relations further highlight contrasts. Canadian provinces generate revenue and receive equalization payments, enabling equitable service delivery and regional development (Caro & Romero, 2022). In managing major national challenges—such as economic crises, separatist threats, or health emergencies—both Canadian provinces and Nigerian states are called upon to implement policy, illustrating the importance of subnational involvement in citizens' welfare (Dinan, 2025; Oklobia & Mahmud, 2024).

CONVERGENCES BETWEEN CANADIAN AND NIGERIAN FEDERALISM

Despite differences, both countries adopt federalism to manage diversity and multi-ethnic populations (Watts, 2008; Nkoro & Otto, 2023). In both systems, healthcare, education, and infrastructure require collaboration between national and regional authorities. When facing significant crises—whether economic downturns, secession pressures, or public health challenges—subnational units in both Canada and Nigeria play critical roles in policy implementation

and service delivery, demonstrating that federal structures can serve as tools to balance local autonomy with national governance.

Both federations rely on judicial arbitration to resolve disputes and maintain constitutional balance (Caro & Romero, 2022). They are also dynamic systems, with Canada continuously refining intergovernmental mechanisms and Nigeria engaging in public discourse on restructuring. These convergences show that, despite challenges, federal structures in both countries serve as tools to balance local autonomy with national governance, affecting citizens' daily lives, social cohesion, and governance outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION-BUILDING: LESSONS NIGERIA CAN LEARN FROM CANADA

Nation-building entails creating shared identity and equitable access amid diversity, addressing grievances through inclusive policies. Canada exemplifies this via mechanisms promoting stability, providing Nigeria with insights to overcome ethnic divisions and inequalities. Adopting Canada's approach can transform Nigeria's federalism from divisive to unifying, emphasizing empowerment and dialogue. Drawing from Canada's multicultural success, Nigeria can reduce secession risks and boost institutional trust. Effective federal structures in Canada show how accommodating diversity yields better social and economic results. In post-colonial Nigeria, these lessons could foster resilience and unity.

To begin with, institutionalize inclusive leader dialogues to build trust and avert conflicts.

Canada's Council of the Federation enables routine premier meetings for policy coordination, as in the 1995 Quebec crisis resolution. This strengthens interprovincial ties and overall federation health. Nigeria needs a similar constitutional body for governors and president to collaboratively tackle issues, easing ethnic tensions. Regular, resourced meetings would promote compromise and prevent violence. Mirroring Canada, this would enhance accountability to national goals over partisanship.

Moreover, pursue fiscal decentralization to curb resource conflicts and ensure equitable growth. Canada's equalization transfers aid poorer provinces in delivering services, maintaining autonomy and unity. This supports healthcare and education equity, stabilizing the economy. Nigeria's oil revenue centralization breeds dependency and resentment, widening divides. Grant states more retention, taxation, and transparent formulas to fight corruption and boost local services. Inspired by Canada, this would distribute wealth fairly, advancing nation-building.

In addition, bolster intergovernmental cooperation for better service delivery and coordination. Canada's joint health and education initiatives, like under the Canada Health Act, pool resources effectively. Vital in crises like COVID-19, these ensure unified responses. Empower Nigeria's National Economic Council with binding powers to cut litigation and plan jointly. Institutionalize sectoral meetings to speed infrastructure and minimize conflicts. This model would enhance citizen welfare and government trust, aiding nation-building via partnerships.

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Furthermore, prioritize cultural inclusivity to mend divides and forge national identity. Canada's bilingual and Indigenous language policies, via acts like the Indigenous Languages Act, promote harmony. These address historical injustices and support reconciliation. Nigeria should advance multilingual education and honor diverse figures in symbols and curricula. Launch truth-and-reconciliation for civil war wounds and regional issues. Low-cost yet impactful, these foster diversity as strength, reducing ethno-religious strife.

Lastly, devolve powers nearer to citizens for greater accountability and responsiveness. Canada's provinces allow direct voter influence on local policies, ensuring transparency. This holds leaders accountable through elections and oversight. Nigeria should grant local governments and assemblies financial independence for community needs. Safeguard civil society to boost participation. Like Canada's territorial devolution, this would make governance tangible, fortifying nation-building through local empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the federal systems of Canada and Nigeria, tracing their origins, structures, and impacts on citizens. Canada, originating from voluntary agreements in 1867, has developed a federation where provinces wield substantial power, share resources equitably, and collaborate to deliver services that unify diverse groups. Nigeria, formed through colonial amalgamation in 1914 and affected by military centralization, possesses a federalism that is theoretically sound but practically deficient, resulting in

ethnic divisions, service gaps, and distrust of central authority.

The findings highlight Canada's advantages: mandatory dialogues, depoliticized revenue sharing, institutionalized cooperation, cultural recognition, and empowered subnational entities, all fostering trust and unity. Nigeria's shortcomings arise from over-centralization, ad-hoc collaboration, cultural oversights, and weakened subnational governments, perpetuating calls for restructuring.

To advance, Nigeria should convene a constitutional conference to establish a permanent Council of the Federation, reduce federal revenue control to 50% while empowering states with taxation and equalization mechanisms, transform the National Economic Council into a binding body, mandate multilingual education and inclusive symbols, and restore autonomy to local governments and state assemblies. Canada demonstrates these reforms' efficacy; implementing them is essential to prevent further fragmentation and build a cohesive nation.

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