



**Annual Conference of the International Association of Centre for Federal Studies
at the Centre for Multilevel Federalism, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, India,
November 16-18, 2016**

Conference Theme: “The value of comparative federalism: the legacy of Ronald L. Watts”

The theme of the annual conference this year has been designed as a tribute to the intellectual legacy of Ronald Watts. It commemorates his pioneering work on comparative federalism, which is one of the core aspects of his legacy to federal studies. Ronald Watts was one of the founders of the IACFS and played a stellar role in its functioning over the years. He continues to inspire generations of scholars in federal studies.

It is also appropriate to host the conference in India as Ronald Watts played a key role in the organisation of the Fourth International Conference on Federalism (2007), the first ever in Asia, held in New Delhi.¹ It would also encourage a reflection from this perspective on the state of federalism in Asia as a whole, and particularly the South Asia region.

Under the broad theme of the conference, a number of issues could be examined.

First, it would be useful to revisit the methodologies of comparative federalism elaborated during the twentieth century as well as the typologies which were derived from them.² What are the current and future challenges comparative federalism is and will be facing? How does it link up with key issues of our times in the governance of federal countries? They are confronted with new challenges, while the policy instruments that are available to them to fulfil their responsibilities have dwindled under the impact of globalisation. From the resurgence of identity politics to the emergence of new nationalist movements, what are the methodological challenges that they pose to existing frameworks of comparison? Do we need to revisit concepts such as asymmetrical federalism in the light of experience gained? Do the notions of pure and hybrid systems have the same heuristic value today as more and more systems innovate in unusual ways? This non-exhaustive enumeration only highlights the need to critically re-examine our conceptual tool-kits for comparing federal systems

Secondly, the practice of comparative federalism in scholarship is a key concern. Centres are invited to conduct comparative research on any aspect of federalism, illustrating both methodological issues as well as the value of such research. From the IACFS perspective, this topic could also allow us to reflect on its role as it is conceptualised and as it is perceived by others. What role have the scholars on comparative federalism played in the dissemination and implantation of federal concepts – the export-import dynamics in practice? This experience could possibly produce more useful comparative knowledge. Can ongoing comparisons of transplanted concepts and their adaption to different contexts lower the risk of failure?

¹ Ronald L. Watts and Rupak Chattopadhyay eds, *Unity in Diversity: Learning from Each Other*, 5 volumes, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2008.

² Ronald L. Watts, *Comparing Federal Systems*, 3rd Edition, Queen’s University, 2008

Thirdly, papers could look at the influence of comparative federalism on state practice, with regard to constitution-making as well as constitutional reform. The practice of borrowing from older federations to shape new federations has been wide spread. There are many examples of how federal structures and practices in older federations were adopted by emerging federations but adapted to suit different contexts. It would be useful to draw up a balance sheet of these borrowings and implants from different perspectives.

- For established federal states it could be interesting to investigate why they (often unsuccessfully) attempt to export their “federal wisdom”, how they have been doing it, and whether they could do it better. This would encompass the older federations as well as those born in the first burst of growth via decolonisation. Those that emerged from the second burst encompassed Africa, Europe, and a revival of federalism in Latin America, essentially during the second half of the twentieth century.
- For emerging and incipient federal states, the import criteria and processes should be interesting topics. What are the pitfalls of transplantation? How do transplanted norms and concepts evolve in different legal environments? What factors favour/hinder domestication? Can we detect examples of how, in the design of new federal constitutions, the mistakes / pitfalls in older federation were deliberately avoided? And how do we view the concept of federal innovation, where borrowed ideas are innovatively transformed under the impact of local conditions, to meet new needs and objectives?

The concepts of borrowing and implants are subsumed in the phrase “learning from each other”. Borrowings need not be confined to the design of new federations alone. Reform initiatives in established federations could influence similar initiatives in other federations or quasi-federations. For example, how have federal reforms in Germany impacted on the current Italian reform initiative? How has the federal idea fared in Europe as a whole? In this conference, we will also try to focus on borrowings in newly born Asian federations, or those still in the making.

Papers can thus explore the actual practice in particular countries as well as the underlying assumptions and methodologies used in comparative federalism. Federal institutions have evolved under the impact of changing party systems and the emergence of new modes of intergovernmental interaction, sometimes sustained by federal coalitions. The existence of multiple levels of elected governments has its own logic in terms of multilevel electoral mandates and the changing equations between national and regional political parties. The institutional system has to innovate to meet new challenges .It is this richness of possibilities and the varieties of adaptation of the federal idea that makes comparative federalism so exciting and rewarding.

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