

# Local Government As Agent Of Grassroots Democracy in Nigeria: A Theoretical And Empirical Analysis

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## Introduction

This paper, in line with an increased interest in the process of democratic political change in Nigeria (Arthur Nwanko 1997:8), theoretically and empirically analyses the institution of local government as an indispensable agent of grassroots democracy in Nigeria.

It is the central thesis of this paper that the devolution of power inherent in the inter-governmental structure of all federal political systems in the world and, particularly within the anatomy of Nigerian federalism is a *sine qua non* to the practice of grassroots democracy. In other words, the enhancement of representative grassroots democracy is undeniably one of the major responsibilities explicitly or implicitly earmarked for the local government institution within any federal political structure like Nigeria. Thus, successive Nigerian governments—particularly within the last two decades have given considerable attention—(though varying in magnitude)—to the issue of grassroots democracy and the infinite possibilities of enhancing it through the institutional mechanism of local government.

Without doubt the attainment and continuous enhancement of grassroots democracy is one of the rationale for the establishment of local government institution. This is discernible from the four goals of local government as stated in the 1976 local government reform namely:-

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- (i) Involvement of local people in the management of local affairs.
- (ii) Facilitating exercise of democratic self-government close to the local level.
- (iii) Mobilization of human resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development drive and fair:
- (iv) Providing a two-way channel of communication between local communities and government (Daily Times, July 8 1976 p.11).

From these goals, the role of local government, as agent of grassroots democracy, is without doubt indispensable. These goals show that local governments are fundamental to building a stable representative government not just at the federal and state levels but also at the grassroots level (Ibid.).

Hence, according to (Adamolekun 1983, p. 71) they formed the institutional characteristics of local governments and, are commonly accepted as the yardstick for distinguishing between one system of local government and another.

Given this, we would contend that local government is an indispensable instrument for enhancing grassroots democracy. It is an institution that promotes the values of representative participatory democracy, efficiency and political autonomy of the grassroots people.

Deriving from the above, it is equally our contention that local governments is to grassroots democracy what basic tissues are to the human body. This is a derivative of the fact that many functions usually performed by local governments could not be centralized due to the fact that:

- (i) People in the local community presumably know their locality well and apt to understand its needs far better than others from a distance.
- (ii) Local people could have superior capacity to conduct their own local affairs.
- (iii) There is limit to the span of public activities in which the central or state government can successfully engage (Fieldman & Goldbrick M. 1970. P. 29).

The incessant reformulation and improvements in the status of local governments as corroborated by past and recent developments—(scrapping of states' ministries of local government, policy of direct disbursement of statutory allocations, 1989 and 1992 new revenue allocation formula, 1989, 1991 and 1996 creation of additional local government areas), are indications of the indispensability of local government institutions to grassroots democracy in Nigeria

## **II Theoretical Analysis of Grassroots Democracy**

One of the multifaceted problems one often encounters within any federal political arrangement concerns the attainment of an uninhibited healthy maintenance of the consentient relationship on which such a political arrangement is anchored. This is particularly so, considering its structural syndrome of unity in diversity which demands element of co-operational symbiosis between its component parts. An effective mechanism for a friction-free federal political arrangement anywhere within the physiological fibers of the global political community is the concept of 'grassroots democracy'. Thus, it has been typified as an indispensable tissue of democratic vitality particularly within a multiethnic and ethno-culturally polarized polity like Nigeria.

Having stated this, at the nib of our mind, our major concern here is to define grassroots democratic syndrome as it relates to

the institutional mechanism of local government. But then, an attempt would first be made to define democracy. "Democracy is the government of the people by the people for the people". It is the government that makes for mass participation of the people in the process of governance.

Democracy as a form of political organisation dates back to more than twenty-five hundred years (Akindele, 1987, Akindele and Obiyan, 1997). It has, since then, been a constant concern of political theory (Ibid.)

The word democracy appeared for the first time in history in the fifth century BC and since this time it has spanned across various stages ranging from the period of antiquity, medieval period, renaissance to contemporaneous period of democratic governance. Within this period, various scholars, theories, philosophers have defined democracy.

Those who have made the definitional efforts included Aristotle and Plato, whose attitudes to democracy were initially ambivalent and cautious. Others included, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill, Alex de Tocqueville.

Regardless of the various intellectual epochs these scholars and philosophers could be identified with, the general focus of their definitional efforts has largely been on the values and norms of society (Ibid.) Thus, democracy has long enjoyed empirical and normative definitions within the polities of the world in spite of the divergence in the ideological underpinnings of the individualistic and collectivistic schools of thoughts on democracy. By and large, we would contend that democracy implies equal participation, and representation in the making of decisions that affect the citizens themselves. And, without doubt, local government has a tremendous role to play in the efficacious existence and maturation of the syndromes of democracy,

particularly when it comes to the undeterred devolution of governance to the grassroots of any political system. The aims of local governments in the Nigerian context can be broken down into Arthur Mass tripartite value framework as recorded by (Olowu 1984) as participation, administrative efficiency and political autonomy.

Local government therefore should be precisely what the word government implies "governing of the people at the grassroots". Succinctly put, however, grassroots democracy is that sort of democracy that emerged from an inward looking set-up, that is, power emerges on a stratified layer from the localities to the centre. The autonomy of the localities in a grassroots democracy is measured by the level of dependence of the centre on the elected representatives from the localities. An example is the American democracy in which representatives in the congress are elected from their sub-units in a pyramidal form.

More importantly, grassroots democracy connotes that local dwellers are governed and, as well feeling the impact of the existing government. In other words, it is referred to as a principle of participatory democracy whereby the administration of the people evolves from local base of any given country. Government through such accredited grassroots people is drawn nearer to the masses through the efficacious mechanism of local government.

### **III Concept of Local Government**

According to Akindele, (1992, 1993, 1995) the creation of local government has, on its own, created excitement within the academia and the practicing world of administration and democratic governance. This, coupled with the irresistible attraction of local government institution, as one of the vertical organs of government that has been constitutionally recognized in most polities within the global political community, among other things, has been the major catalyst for the continuous intellectual

fomentation on its subject matter by eminent scholars and practitioners within the disciplinary parameters of public administration scholarship and practice. These scholars and practitioners have, with varying degrees of specificity conceptually analysed the issues of local government and its existence. They have, in the process, highlighted the need for its infinite existence as a mechanism of governance and realization of political goals.

These scholars, all of whom could not be analytically articulated here, due to obvious reason and, the fact that they have been extensively documented in our previous works (Akindele, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1995) and, elsewhere, include among others, Humes and Martins (1964:130) who once posited that:

*Local governments are infra-sovereign geographic units contained within sovereign nation or quasi-sovereign state... like all units of government, local government units have a defined area, a population, a continuing organisation, and the authority and power to undertake and carry out public activities.*

Even though, this definition appeared to be fashioned in a descriptive way as to what local government is, it lacks explicit depiction of its formation. Thus, in a more simple and synoptic manner, Ntieyong and Akpan (1967 – 50) defined local government as:

*The breaking down of a county into small units or localities concerned play a direct and full part through their elected representative (where applicable), who exercise power or undertake functions under the general authority of the national government.*

Adopting the same analytical premise, though, with more blending, sophistication and intellectual potency, Ola (1984), opined that local government is,

*a political subdivision of a nation or state, which constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs including the powers to improve taxes or exact labour for prescribed purposes.*

The intellectual definitional efforts on the concept of local government could be really understood against the definitional packaging of the concept in the 1976 guidelines to local government reform according to which local government institution in Nigeria was and still seen to mean:

*Government at the local level ... established by law to exercise specific powers within defined as real (and) to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal government in their areas, and to ensure that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized (the Reform, 1976. P.1).*

Put together, local government means the subordinate administrative system by means of which the affairs of segments of a country like Nigeria, are concretely administered by requisite institutions of government through the appropriate exercise of authority or legitimate power of decision.

#### **IV Local Government and Grassroots Democracy in Nigeria**

From the definitions and explanations of local government and grassroots democracy so far made, the purpose – (involvement of local citizenry in the management and local governance of local affairs; satisfactions of the needs of the local people through effective services delivery and, efficient and effective mobilization of local human and material resources) – of local governments could be regarded as indispensable to the cornerstone of grassroots democratic system of government. This, which is uninhibitively discernible from the analytical consideration of the concept of

grassroots democracy above, equally explains the major justifications for local governments as tabularly shown below:

**Table-1**  
**Summary Table Of The Major Justification For**  
**Local Government.**

<b>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION</b> (Democratic Life, etc.)	<b>CLIENT SERVICES</b>	<b>RESOURCES MOBILIZATION</b> Liberty, Autonomy
1. Training in corporate responsibility and	1. Decongest central government business.	1. Financial autonomy correlations positively with political autonomy.
2. Enhances popular involvement and necessary popular support for leadership.	2. Detailed knowledge required for certain services.	2. Education in corporate responsibilities and discipline.
3. Opens formal means of communication between ruler and ruled.	3. Proximity to decision-making bodies improves services responsiveness and efficiency.	3. Especially relevant in situation such as LDC where government resources are very limited and short.

**Source:** Dele Olowu (1980), Local Government and Social Services in Nigeria: the impact of Urbanization as adopted by M.P. Adegboye: problems and prospects of local government internally generated revenue in Oyo State, Nigeria" (unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile – Ife, July, 1987) pp. 27 – 28. Akindele S.T. Financing local governments within Nigerian Federalism: A case study of Ondo State (unpublished PhD. Thesis, University of Benin, Benin City, 1990 p. 37. Akindele (1992).

In other words, local government exists to bring about grassroots democracy, serve as a base for political participation and education. Hence local government as earlier stated, are to grassroots democracy what basic tissues are to human body. And without them government would have no vitality (Blair op. it, p.4) to the lives of the grassroots people.

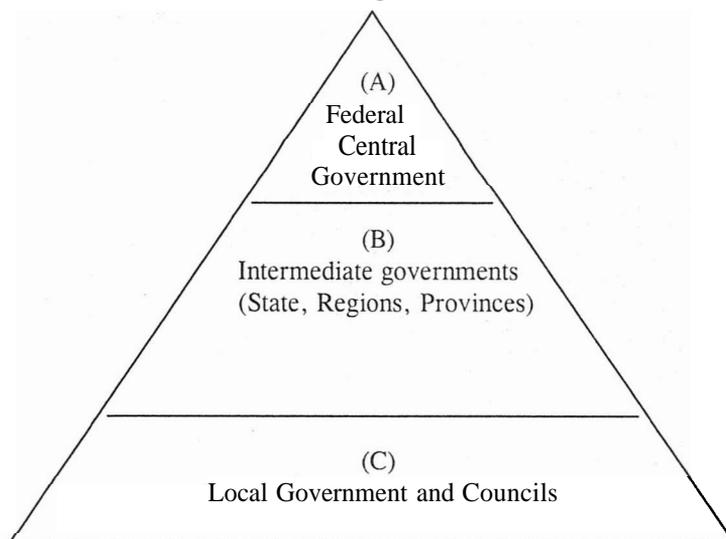
The history of local government and incessant remodifications it has been exposed to within the Nigeria polity up to now, are indicative of the recognition of it as an indispensable agency for grassroots democracy (Akindele 1992, 1995).

Thus, as stated in the Local Government yearbook (LGYB,1998:V):

*Local Government in Nigeria has assumed a position of crucial importance in the nation's attempt at building a representative and sustainable political system based on a deinocratic culture of transparency, accountability and efficient management of resources. Most of the transformations in the political system over the last two decades almost invariably had the reform of the system of local government as a key turning-point: an indication that successive Governments have rightly perceived and recognised local governments as the key stone upon which a desirable political system should be built. During the First Republic, each regional government, based on the Federal constitution in operation, had absolute control of local governments within its area of jurisdiction. Thus, policies on local governnzsents differed from region to region, leading not only to variation but also a serious imbalance in structures and functions of local governments in the regions. In 1976 local government experienced visible changes in structures and functions. These major structural and functional reviews not only transformed the finance, management, and politics of local governments but also unified the previously diverse systems throughout the country. Most significantly, local governinents were accorded recognition as a third-tier of government in Nigeria.*

This explains the pyramidal nature of the administrative' and governmental structure of the Nigerian three-tier federalism as it exists today and, depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1:  
Diagram Showing The Hierachy Of The Administrative And Governmental Structure Of Nigerian Three-Tier Federalism



**CODE :**

- A. Always one regardless of the polity.
- B. Numbers vary with structures of different countries. Nigeria has 36 at present.
- C. Always many and vary with structures, constitutional provisions, needs and population of each country. Nigeria initially had 301. The number later increased to 489 in 1989 and, 589 in 1991 but has 774 at present -(See Appendix 1)-as a result of the local government creation exercise of October 1<sup>st</sup> 1996. (Akindele, 1992, Local Government year Book, 1998, Ozoka, 2000).

This structural arrangement has since been constitutionally recognized in Nigeria most especially as it concerns the functions of the local governments vis-à-vis the needs of the local people. In other words, the Nigerian constitution particularly those of 1979, 1989 and 1999 specifically detailed the functions and place of the local governments in their various provisions.

These constitutions vividly demonstrated the transparent commitment of Nigeria's Federal Government to the actual survival of local government institution as the real third-tier of Nigeria's federal structure (Akindele et al 2002). This is put into vogue by the fact that a whole schedule (schedule 4. of the 1979 constitution contained the functions of the local government within the Nigerian Federalism, and in the same vein, the 1989 and 1999 constitutions detailed the functions of the local government in schedule 4 part (1) (Nigerian constitutions, 1979, 1989, 1999).

### **Functions of Local Governments in Nigeria**

The functions of Local Governments as referred here, are detailed in the 1999 Nigerian constitution as follows:

1. The main functions of a local government council are as follows-

(a) the consideration and the making of recommendations to a State commission on economic planning or any similar body on-

(i) the economic development of the State, particularly in so far as the areas of authority of the council and of the State are affected, and

(ii) proposals made by the said commission or body;

(b) collection of rates, radio and television licences;

(c) establishment and maintenance of cemeteries, burial grounds and homes for the destitute or infirm;

(d) licensing of bicycles, trucks (other than mechanically propelled trucks), canoes, wheel barrows and carts;

(e) establishment, maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motor parks and public conveniences;

- (f) construction and maintenance of roads, streets, street lightings, drains and other public highways, parks, gardens, open spaces, or such public facilities as may be prescribed from time to time by the House of Assembly of a State;
- (g) naming of roads and streets and numbering of houses;
- (h) provision and maintenance of public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposal;
- (i) registration of all births, deaths and marriages;
- (j) assessment of privately owned houses or tenements for the purpose of levying such rates as may be prescribed by the House of Assembly of a State; and
- (k) control and regulation of -
  - (i) out - door advertising and hoarding,
  - (ii) movement and keeping of pets of all description,
  - (iii) shops and kiosks,
  - (iv) restaurants, bakeries and other places for sales of food to the public,
  - (v) laundries, and
  - (vi) licensing, regulation and control of the sale of liquor.

2. The functions of a local government council shall include participation of such council in the Government of a State as respects the following matters-

- (a) the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education;
- (b) the development of agriculture and natural resources, other than the exploitation of minerals;
- (c) the provision and maintenance of health services; and

(d) such other functions as may be conferred on a local government council by the House of Assembly of the State. (Nigerian constitution, 1999 150-151).

These functions can be trichotomized into mandatory functions, state and local government joint responsibilities (functions) and, General functions

The mandatory functions are those on which the local governments have sole responsibility; the state - local joint functions are those functions which the local governments can jointly participate with the state government as shown in table 2 while the general functions are the functions, which the state government may confer on the local government (Aghayere, 1987:5-6)

**Table 2****Functions Of Local Governments In Nigeria**

<u>SCHEDULE/PART A</u> Exclusive functions/responsibilities of Local Government under exceptional or temporary circumstances:	<u>SCHEDULE/PART B</u> Responsibilities/functions which Local Governments may concurrently run with the State Government if Local Governments are not equipped to perform them initially:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Markets and Motor Parks.</li> <li>2. Sanitary Inspections, refuse and nightsoil disposal.</li> <li>3. Control of vermin.</li> <li>4. Slaughter houses, slaughter slabs.</li> <li>5. Public conveniences.</li> <li>6. Burial grounds.</li> <li>7. Registration of births, deaths and marriages.</li> <li>8. Provision of community and local recreation centres.</li> <li>9. Parks, gardens and public open spaces.</li> <li>10. Grazing grounds, fuel plantations.</li> <li>11. Licensing supervision and regulation of bake houses, and laundries.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Health Centres, maternity centres, dispensary and health clinics, ambulances services, leprosy clinics and preventive health services.</li> <li>2. Abattoirs meat inspection.</li> <li>3. Nursery and Primary adult education.</li> <li>4. Information and public enlightenment.</li> <li>5. Provision of scholarship and bursaries.</li> <li>6. Provision of public libraries and reading rooms.</li> <li>7. Agricultural extension, animal health extension services and veterinary clinics.</li> <li>8. Rural and semi-urban water supply.</li> <li>9. Fire services.</li> <li>10. Provision of roads and streets (other than trunk roads), their lighting, drainage.</li> <li>11. Control of beggars, of prostitution and repatriations of destitutes.</li> </ol>

12. Licensing, regulation and control of the sale of liquor.	12. Control of water and atmospheric pollution.
13. Licensing and regulation of bicycles, handcarts and other types of vehicles, except those mechanically propelled, and canoes.	13. Provision of homes for destitutes, the infirm and orphans.
14. Control or keeping of animals.	14. Provision of public utilities, except where restricted by other legislation, specifically including provisions, of road and inland water transport.
15. Control of hardings advertisements, use of loud-speakers in or near public places, drumming.	15. Public housing programmes, operation of commercial undertakings, control of traffic and parking.
16. Naming of roads and streets and numbering of plots buildings.	16. Regulation and control of building. Town and country planning.
17. Control and collection of revenue from forestry estate or gazetted forest reserves.	17. Pipe sewage systems.
18. Collection of vehicles parking charges.	
19. Collection of property and other rates community tax and other designated revenue sources.	

*Source:* Ondo State Government, Local Government Edict, 1976, and Ministry of Local Government and information, Circular letter, Akure, February 18,1977 Pp 4-5, (Akindele,1992)

To effectively and, further enhance the relevance of the local government in Nigeria, in the performance of its functions, *vis-à-*

vis the grassroots people, the States and Local Government Affairs Office (SLGAO) was established "as the co-ordinator of all the activities of all local government nationwide (LGYB, 1998). As stated in the year book (Ibid), the office, in its coordinating role, has played active parts in Local Government administration through policy initiation, implementation and development. It has also tried to enhance the Local Governments' service delivery capacity"

Other functions of the SLGAO include the following:

- (i) Periodic review of Financial Memoranda and instructions guiding the fiscal and financial operations at the Local Government Level.
- (ii) Regular conduct of workshops and seminars and training programmes in collaboration with Local Government and International agencies to improve the skills, knowledge and progression of the Local Government employees in different spheres.
- (iii) Representing the Local Government at the monthly Federation Account Allocation Committee meetings.
- (iv) Regular vetting and monitoring of Local Government Staff Welfare and training matters.
- (v) Periodic review of the schemes of service for Local Government employees and such other sundry matters intimately touching on effective and efficient Local Government administrative system in Nigeria.
- (vi) Coordinating the bi-annual conference of the key functionaries responsible for Local Government Affairs in Nigeria. (ibid: XI).

In addition to the foregoing, "the Local Government Service Commission is established in each state of the Federation to handle all personnel matters of the staff of the unified Local Government Service," (ibid).

Given the foregoing, we found it innocuous to scientifically attempt a possible linkage between the existence of local government as one of the vertical organ of the Nigerian Federalism and grassroots democracy. Put differently, in our articulation of proper linkage between the existence of local government and fertility of grassroots democracy in Nigeria, we went to the field to empirically test the pulse of the grassroots people as to their perception on the existence of the local governments institutions as mechanism for pursuing and attaining their democratic political aspirations

## **V Methodology**

Relying on the technique of our earlier research work (Akindele, 1990, 1995), we used survey method to generate the primary data for this paper.

### **(i) Administration of Questionnaire and sampling method.**

Using the technique of probability sampling design, we administered our research questionnaire in two randomly selected local government areas in Ekiti State. The local government areas are Ado-Ekiti (Urban) and, Irepodun/Ifelodun (Rural).

### **(ii) Sample Size**

The sample size is two hundred (200) subjects. One hundred (100) subjects were randomly sampled from each of the two local government areas.

## **VI Empirical Analysis of the Subjects' Responses**

The responses of the subjects to the questionnaire were respectively subjected to descriptive and test of significance statistical analysis.

### **(i) Descriptive Statistical Analysis**

This section analyses the cumulative responses of our sampled two hundred <sup>\*</sup>(200) subjects to the five point-continuum Likert scale close-ended questionnaire tied to the only hypothesis formulated, on the basis of our research objective.

#### **(a) Research Objective**

The main objective of this paper is to:

Examine the linkage between the existence of local government in Nigeria and democratic political participation at the grassroots level

#### **(b) Research hypothesis**

The existence of local government in Nigeria is positively responsible for democratic political participation at the grassroots level.

This hypothesis which was later subjected to null testing, using rural-urban dichotomy based on our earlier categorization of same (Akindele, 1990, 1995) in the area of coverage, was first treated to some descriptive analyses with the use of the measures of central tendency (means, median, mode) and measures of variability like standard deviation.

Table 3 below gives the means and standard deviation of the cumulative responses of our sampled subjects to the lone

hypothesis which depicted the core component of our research topic under focus.

**Table 3**

**Table showing the cumulative responses to our hypothesis 1A**

Hypothesis	Responses	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
I	4.60	0.73

It is clearly discernible at a glance from the table above that our only hypothesis has a very high mean score of 4.60 from the respondents. The standard deviation of 0.73 is also low enough to explain that responses clustered around the mean. The spread could be conceptualized by the relation  $4.60 \pm 0.073$  which gives the range of responses as between  $4.60 - 0.73$  and  $4.60 + 0.73$ . That is, between 3.87 and 5.00 (maximum).

From this, it could be argued with scientific precision that all our sampled two hundred (200) respondents gave positive responses that the existence of local government in Nigeria is positively responsible for democratic political participation at the grassroots level particularly now that the nation is once again practising a multi-party system in her fourth Republic. This shows that local government is an institutional process for promoting democracy and, that, it has the capacity for political empowerment (Hans-Peter Schmitz, 1997:18).

#### **i. Test of significance for the Hypothesis**

For further scientific analysis, we proceeded to reformulate our hypothesis so that it could be subjected to statistical analysis. It was tested for significance at  $p < 0.05$  and the student t-test for significance was effectively used. Urban and rural dichotomy based on our previous findings in other research (Akindele 1990

and 1995) was used for the hypothesis, which we reformulated as stated below:

**Null Hypothesis:**

*There is no significant difference between the rural and urban local governments in Nigeria as to whether the existence of Local Governments in Nigeria is positively responsible for Democratic political participation at the grassroots level.*

This null hypothesis was tested for significance using the 't' test, The table below gives the summary analysis.

**Table 4**

**'t' test analysis for our hypothesis I<sup>b</sup>**

Variables	Sample size	Mean	S.D	t- cal	t table
Urban Responses	100	4.59	0.71	0.06	1.65
Rural Responses	100	4.59	0.76		

df=198 (pooled variance Estimate)

$P < 0.05$

The t-calculated (0.06) is less than the 't' table (1.65)

This hypothesis is accepted at  $p < 0.5$  because the critical value of 1.65 for the one tailed test is greater than the calculated value of 0.06. This acceptance clearly demonstrates that, there is no significant difference between the responses of the dwellers of the urban and rural local Government areas of Ekiti State,- (though, both could be regarded as grassroots local governments) - as to the positive causal relationships between the existence of local governments in Nigeria and enhancement of democratic political participation at the grassroots level.

From the summation of our findings through both descriptive and statistical analyses, it is reasonably and scientifically deducible that the affinity between local governments and

grassroots democracy in Nigeria is unquestionable. This affinity is better explained by the existence of local government as agent of grassroots democracy in Nigeria.

## **V Conclusion**

This paper theoretically and empirically examined the causal linkage between local government institution as one of the vertical organs of the Nigerian federal political arrangement and the fertility of grassroots democracy within the parameters of the same federalism. And, following the theoretical elucidation of the central concepts of the paper, empirical investigative orientation in line with the under-currents of scientific research methodology was utilized. This was done to confirm our initial theoretical explorations.

In the process, the positive causal linkage between local government and grassroots democracy in Nigeria was established. In other words, from our research efforts, it has been found that the existence of local government in Nigeria promotes grassroots democracy within her federal political structure. And, this, based on our rural-urban analytical dichotomy, is without prejudice to the place of abode or geographical location of the citizenry.

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### **Special Publication**

Federal Republic of Nigeria (1998): *Local Government Year Book* produced by The States and Local Government Affairs Office, The Presidency, Abuja, Nigeria. Printed and bound in Nigeria by Tonem publicity, Abuja.