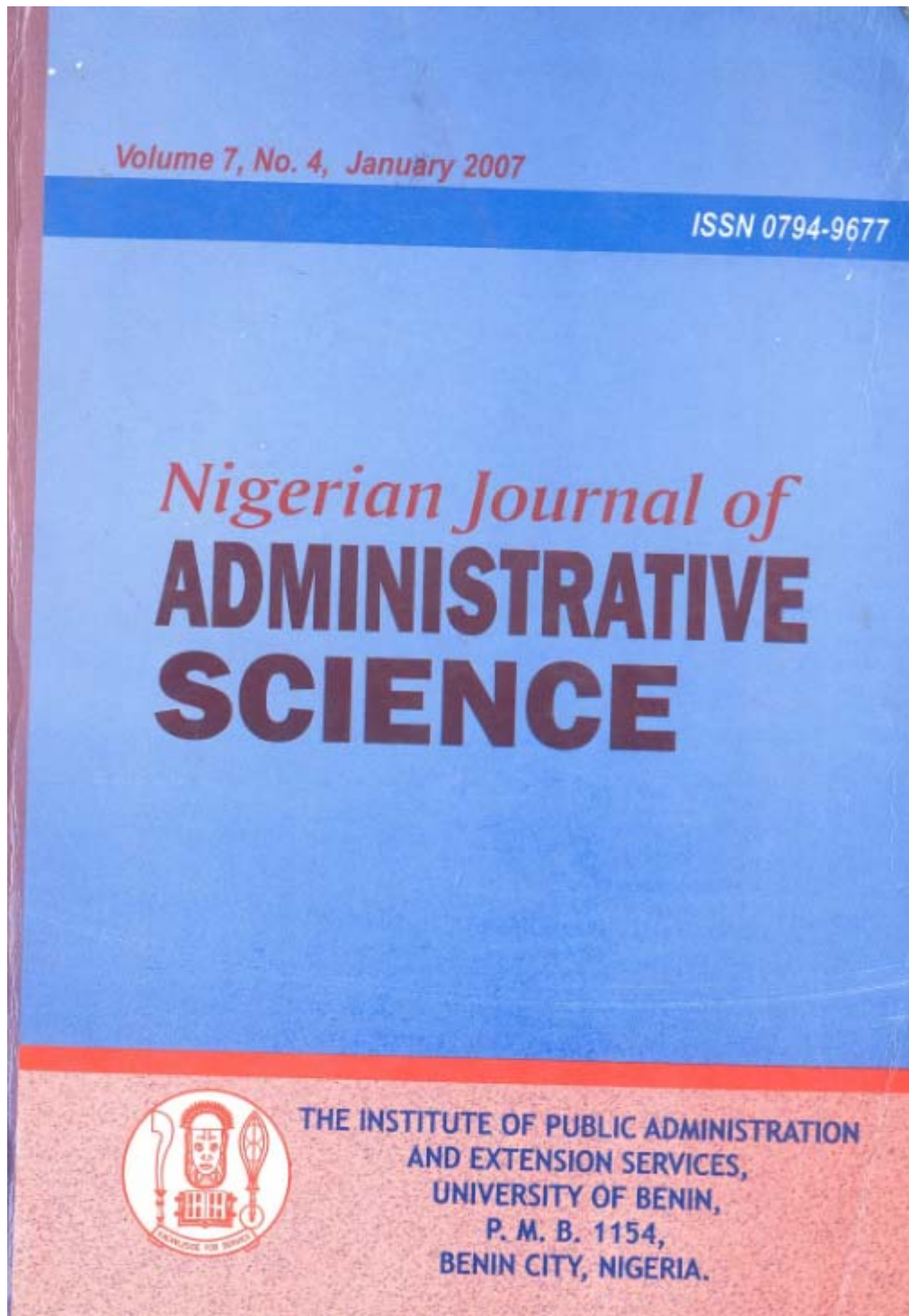


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# ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF NIGERIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

D. A TONWE & FRIDAY NCHUCHUWE

The efficiency and effectiveness of local government institutions in subserving local, regional and national goals in modern societies is becoming more problematic than ever. Efforts directed toward making local governments more efficient and effective is usually approached through structural and institutional reforms. This has not yielded the anticipated results. This study purports that the performance of local governments is more affected by ecological factors than structural and institutional defects. Accordingly, this paper reviews the ecological context of local government in Nigeria. The political, economic, social-cultural and constitutional/legal components of the ecology are highlighted. The study reveals that the environmental spectrum in which local government operates in Nigeria has three major parts; fluid national polity, heterogeneous poly-normative society and imbalanced fluctuating 1 economy. Interacting at the local level, it has manifested itself in a system of local government which is marked by institutional fragility, particularistic orientations and economics of non-viability. The prevailing system of local government has proved to be incapable of contributing to the realization of nation and state-building goals.

## **Introduction**

The structure and functions, as well as the aims and objectives of government at the local level all over the world do not vary widely when compared institutionally. This fact notwithstanding, there is a great difference between local governments in terms of their efficiency and effectiveness all over the world. The implication of this is that, besides the formal structural and organizational arrangements, there are other factors which serve both as the support and constraints for efficient and effective functioning of local governments. The socio-cultural, economic and political milieu in which Public

Administration-national, state or local operates, serve as parameters for the attainment or non-attainment of set goals and objectives.

At In systemic terms, government at the local level is continually interacting with (affected by as well as affecting), social, political, and economic sub-systems in the society. Without giving adequate attention to these parameters, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend why the same structural and organizational arrangement fail in one place and succeed in another.

It is worth mentioning however that, the idea of emphasizing ecological perspective in Public Administration is not new. Eminent scholars like F.W. Riggs, Roscoe Martins, John M. Gaus and Robert Dalh have emphasized the need to study the ecology of Public Administration. Riggs himself asserted that comparative studies have their highest value and relevance when they are empirical, nomothetic and ecological (Riggs 1962:15). It is however interesting to note that contemporary scholars are giving an unprecedented boost to the ecological approach in their research efforts in Public Administration because of growing realization among them of the fact that, the march towards evolving a science of administration would be greatly enhanced by emphasizing the ecological perspective. Thus, it is prudent to study the ecological parameters of local government in the Nigerian setting.

### **Political Geography: The Nation, States and Local Governments**

Nigeria is a large country having a complex society. Nigeria like other countries in the African continent is a historical accident. Her boundaries and peoples within them presented no more than the limits of British Power at the time of partitioning of Africa (Coleman 1955:41). It is bounded on the East by Republic of Cameroun, on the West by the Republic of Benin, on the North by Republic of Niger and washed on the South by the Atlantic Ocean. It covers an area of 923,768 square kilometers (one of the biggest in Africa) and has a population of 140 million people which makes it the largest political

unit in Africa. Nigeria has 36 political sub-units in the form of States, a Federal Capital Territory serving as the Nation's Capital and 774 Local Government Areas. Appendix 1 shows the breakdown in this regard.

### **Political Component**

The existence of Nigeria as a political entity dates back only to January 1, 1914 when the Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria and the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos were amalgamated. At that time the British established a unitary political-administrative system for the entire country.

By the 1930s, administrative convenience necessitated the division of the country into four parts, namely, the colony of Lagos, Northern, Eastern and Western Regions. The existence of the three regions as political entities was recognized in 1946. Under the 1951 constitution, the three Regional Administrations became Regional Governments in their respective jurisdictions. Self-Government was granted to the Eastern and Western regions in 1957 and to the Northern Region in 1959 as a precursory step towards the nation's Independence, which was granted on October 1, 1960. Exactly three years later, on October 1, 1963, Nigeria became a Republic, thus 'severing' all colonial links with the British crown, but retaining her membership of the commonwealth.

It is worth mentioning that the struggle for Independence from the colonial rulers was characterized by relatively lesser violence and bloodshed when compared with a number of other British colonies. No doubt during the colonial era, there were incidence of riots and disturbances, and Nigeria must have had more constitutions in fewer years than most countries in the world, hut each was a definite step forward and was born out of logic not bloodshed or civil commotion (Niven 1967:227). This acknowledged political peace during the colonial era was short-lived and did not characterize the state of affairs after Independence.

After Independence, Nigeria adopted the Federal-Parliamentary system of Government and for the first time Nigerians had an opportunity to shape the destiny of the country in the form of an organized civil rule. January 15, 1966 (hardly six years after the emergence of civil rule) saw the end of civilian administration following a bloody coup d'etat by the military which brought Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi to power. The military cited the break down of administration in the country, corruption, etc. as their reasons for taking over power. With this action of the military, they set a precedent that was characteristic of the Nigerian political system until 1999.

July 29, 1966 witnessed a counter bloody coup which brought Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon (later General) to power. His assumption of power sparked off tension in the country. Some military officers particularly those from the Eastern Region, saw Gowon's assumption of office as Head of State as irregular, as there were other officers in the army that were senior to him in rank. The Eastern region on May 30, 1967 resolved to secede from the country and proclaimed the region the Republic of Biafra with Lt. Colonel Ojukwu (later General in the Biafran Army) as Head of State. This proclamation immediately sparked off a civil war in the country which ended with the country remaining one in 1970. Earlier, on May 26, 1967, in the hope of forestalling succession by appealing to minority groups in the Eastern Region, General Gowon decreed the division of the four regions which made up Nigeria into twelve states.

On July 29, 1975 General Gowon's administration was toppled in a bloodless coup in which Brigadier (later General) Murtala Muhammed became Head of State. Soon after his administration took over the reins of government, it announced its programme to relinquish power and return the country to a democratically elected government by October 1, 1979. The program included:

- (i) the creation of more states,

- (ii) reform of the local government system and elections to local government councils throughout the country,
- (iii) the preparation of a Draft Constitution by a Drafting Committee and the consideration of the Draft Constitution by the Constituent Assembly composed of largely of elected representatives and a number of people representing special interests, and
- (iv) the establishment of a Federal Electoral Commission for the organisation of elections at the Federal, State and Local levels.

During his administration, seven more states were created, which brought the number of states in the country to nineteen. Though, General Muhammed was killed on February 13, 1976, in an abortive coup, his administration continued under Major General (later General) Olusegun Obasanjo.

The Muhammed/Obasanjo administration worked strictly according to their political programme and as expected, October 1, 1979 witnessed the end of thirteen years of military rule in the country and a democratically elected government was installed. The country adopted a presidential system of government modelled in line with that of the United States.

The second attempt by Nigerians to practice democracy was also short-lived. It was marred by violence owing to electoral malpractices in the 1983 elections, corruption and a down-turn in the Nigerian economy. The military took advantage of the chaotic situation and seized power on December 31, 1983 and Major-General Buhari assumed the office of Head of State.

On August 17, 1985 (less than two years later) Major- General Buhari's regime was overthrown in a counter coup and Major General (later General) Ibrahim Babangida assumed the office of President of the country. On October 1, 1987 the military administration under General Babangida created two more states, bringing the number



of states in the country to twenty-one. Eleven more states were created by the Babangida administration in August 1991 bringing the number of States in the country to thirty. The political programme of the Babangida military regime was to relinquish power and return the country to a democratically elected government under a two-party system by August 27, 1993. In pursuance of the administration's programme to return the country to civil rule come 1993, a preliminary nation-wide local government election was held on December 12, 1987 on non-party basis for a two year term. In 1989 the elected local government councils were dissolved as a way of forestalling incumbents taking advantage when party politics becomes operational. In December 1990 elections on party basis took place at the local government level.

The transition programme of General Babangida to return the country to civilian rule ran into troubled waters when it, became obvious that he had no genuine plan to relinquish power to civilians. The Third Republic could only have emergency interim government under Chief Ernest Shonekan who was toppled after a couple of months in office by General Sanni Abacha in 1993.

On October 1, 1996, six additional states were created by the Sanni Abacha regime after overthrowing the fragile Shonekan's interim administration put in place by General Babangida. This brought the number of states in the country to thirty-six. Abacha's plan to succeed himself as civilian president failed due to his demise in 1998.

General Abdulsalam Abubakar took over the mantle of leadership and within an unprecedented short period handed over power to an elected civilian government on May 29, 1999. Chief Olusegun Obasanjo emerged as President in the country's Fourth Republic. President was in power as civilian president up to 2007 when Musa Y'Adua was elected President of the country.

It is evident from the events catalogued above that in contrast to the widely acknowledged peaceful political atmosphere in Nigeria during the struggle for political Independence, the Post-Independence political atmosphere has been turbulent.

The fluid nature of the political set-up since Independence notwithstanding, Nigeria has traditionally been a federal polity. This was categorically recognized with the granting of self-government to the Eastern and Western Regions in 1957 and to the Northern Region in 1959 before the country was granted Independence in 1960.

The fluid and turbulent nature of the country's political setting as had a great deal of impact on the local government system. Instability in the National Government has also meant instability in the governments at the state and local levels. A change from civil rule to military rule involves a substantial change in policy and approach which permeates all the levels of government. One important development that has accompanied the creation of more states in Nigeria has been the creation of more local governments and thus disrupting existing social harmony and concomitant development efforts of the grass-roots citizenry. The creation of six states by General Sanni Abacha's administration for example was accompanied by the creation of additional 182 new local government areas. Inconsistency in policy and approach constitutes a serious handicap to the efficiency and effectiveness of local government, since it is much more difficult for local government to adjust to such frequent and disruptive changes.

### **Socio-Cultural Component**

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society. Ethnographers estimate that there are well over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups in Nigeria. Only a handful of these ethnic groups, however, are undeniably distinct. There are three major ethnic groups in the country; the Hausa- Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the south-west and the Ibo in the south-east. Other principal ethnic groups are the Edo (Bini), Efik, Urhobo, Ijaw, Tiv, and

Kanuri. Except in very few cases, such as the Itsekiri which is an ethnic group and has one language/dialect, these ethnic groups consist of smaller social groups speaking more than one dialect. For instance, there exist the Ibo of Onitsha, Oguta, etc., the Yoruba of Ekiti, Ijesha, Oyo and so on, the Urhobo of Okpe, Agbon, Ughelli, Agboro, Effurun, etc. Usually, the various social groups forming one ethnic group share many social sub-systems particularly religious and ancestral, and are wrapped together in many ways through the use of one intelligible language (Onigu 1974:32).

Nigeria is one country with enormous diversity in cultures and values. Local sentiments and attachment are still very strong in the country and sometimes stronger than the national ones. The civil war the country had to go through from 1967 to 1970, perhaps; most clearly portrays how strong local sentiments could be.

The socio-cultural set-up in the country at large has recorded tremendous impact on the functioning of local government. In the Local Government areas which encompass two or more ethnic/ linguistic groups or where there exist two or more clans within a local government area, there is sometimes the practice of blind loyalty to one's ethnic group or clan. There is also tendency to view the major ethnic group or clan as not caring about or oppressing the minority ethnic groups or clans. More often than not, discussions and debates at local council meetings reveal a great deal of ethnic or clan bias.

In certain cases ethnic and clan considerations rather than merit are uppermost in the award of contracts and distribution of amenities by local government councils. Religious plurality has also taken its toll on the efficient and effective functioning of local governments and indeed the unity and stability of the country. There seems to be the absence of respect for the doctrine of secularism by the Muslim dominated north and the predominantly Christian south of the country. Incidence of religious riots in the northern parts of the country involving Muslims and Christians clearly indicates the strong attachment to religion. Just like ethnic or clan considerations, it is not unusual for

religion to be the deciding factor in some local government councils as to who gets what, how and when.

### **Economic Component**

Nigeria is traditionally an agricultural country. The country before and at Independence was mainly an agricultural economy. Available data show that well over 80 percent of the country's population estimated at 54 million as at 1960 were engaged in agriculture and related rural endeavours. More than 80 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings in 1960 also came from the export of agricultural produce which were principally cocoa, groundnut, palm produce, rubber and livestock. The share of agriculture in the country's Gross Domestic Product was as high as 67 percent and industry contributed as low as 3.6 percent of the Gross Domestic Product during the same period (Olokun 1985:31).

Thus, the country at Independence was heavily dependent on the agricultural sector for the employment of the overwhelming majority of its citizens, revenue for domestic budget, foreign exchange needs and the overall sustenance of the country (Olokun 1985:31). Nonetheless, with a greater proportion of the gainfully employed Nigerians involved in subsistence farming in predominantly rural setting and employing simple tools and unsophisticated techniques, the per capital income in 1960 was as low as N60. Though agriculture was the country's major sector, the balance of payment was in surplus during the 1950s. In the 1960s however, the balance of payment ran into deficit owing to the rapid decline of the country's foreign reserve. The prosecution of the civil war (1967-70) further aggravated this problem, and accordingly, appropriate economic measures were adopted to halt the dwindling reserve and the reduction of the balance of payments deficit (Olokun 1985:31).

In the 1970s and the early 1980s, the country's foreign exchange earnings increased tremendously owing to huge foreign currency accruing from the export of crude oil

which began as far back as 1959. This development brought about some positive and negative changes. On the positive side, the country's per capital income increased from N60 as at 1960 to N575 in 1983 (Olokun 1985:31). On the negative side, agriculture which was hitherto the mainstay of the country's economy was neglected. The result was that a country which once depended on agriculture for revenue for her domestic and foreign exchange need, had to import agricultural produce to meet a substantial part of her domestic needs. The situation was further worsened by the fact that the process of industrialization was not pursued with much vigor and the country now spends a substantial proportion of her foreign reserve to import basic industrial products. Nigeria now relies on crude oil for a larger proportion of its internal as well as external revenue and as much as 90 percent of the country's foreign exchange earnings come from the export of crude oil. Efforts in recent times have been directed towards self-sufficiency in agriculture and basic industrial products in the country. It is however sad that fluctuation in international oil prices and management related problems have seriously hampered the realization of this goal. The impact of the introduction of the Second Tier Foreign Exchange Market (later Foreign Exchange Market and then Autonomous Market) which among other things was expected to provide a realistic exchange rate for the naira, attract foreign investments and improve the supply of raw materials and spare parts, thereby catalysing the industrialization process is not achieving these objectives so far. This development in the Nigerian economy has had its fall out on the third tier of government in the country. When the economy was of a rudimentary nature, depending on agriculture and allied rural pursuits, the local governments were able to contribute to these activities nation-wide without much difficulty and could therefore be assigned some credit for the good economy during the 1950s and the early part of the 1960s in the country. With the shift in the revenue base of the country owing to the emergence of oil industry and the colossal amount usually involved in industrial undertakings, governments at the local level are now faced with the problem of consolidating their position in the emergent economic setting. Perhaps, a more important impact of the emergence of oil revenue on local government was that it

dwarfed the revenue from agriculture and allied rural pursuits in terms of computation of national revenue. This development has put local governments in a disadvantaged financial position vis-a-vis macro governments and has tended to encourage the undermining of the strength and autonomy of government at the local level by state and federal governments.

### **Constitutional/Legal Component**

The 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guaranteed a system of local government by democratically elected local government councils in the country. The Constitution in this regard specifically states that:

The system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this constitution guaranteed, and accordingly, the Government of every State shall ensure their existence under law which provides for their establishment, structure, composition finance and functions of such council.

In spite of this constitutional provision, local government in the country during the Second Republic (1979 -1983) was anything but democratic. Both the Federal Government and the State Governments were responsible for stalling the materialization of the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils guaranteed by the constitution. Their role in this regard can be delineated as follows:

October 1, 1979 witnessed the swearing in of democratically elected civilian governments at the State and Federal levels and the return of the military to the barracks. Between October 1, 1979 and December of the same year when the tenure of Local Government Councils was due to expire, dissolution of Local Government Councils by State Governors across the country was prevalent. Only a few councils were allowed to complete their tenure before they were dissolved. Gradually, all the local Government Councils throughout the length and breadth of the country were dissolved by the State Governments and replaced with caretaker committees appointed on partisan basis by

State Governors. This action of the State Governors grossly undermined a system of local government by democratically elected local government councils guaranteed by the Constitution.

Granted that the various State Local Government Laws in the country empowers the Governor of the State to order inquiries into the activities of local governments and to suspend any defaulting local government council, this power was used in rather irresponsible manner by State Governors during the Second Republic. This is evident from the fact that inquiries were not instituted by the State Governors which showed that the Local Government Councils faulted in the discharge of their functions in a manner not conducive to the welfare of the inhabitants of their areas of authority as required by law before the dissolution of the Councils.

An important constitutional decision is worth mentioning here. In a case brought before the Chief Judge of the defunct Bendel State by six legislators of the then Bendel State House of Assembly against the State Governor for dissolving all the Local Government Councils in the State and replacing them with Caretaker Committees, he ruled that from the evidence before the court, there was no proof that the Local Government Councils were charged with bad government, investigated and faulted before their dissolution was ordered by the State Governor (Ola 1983:148). This action of the State Governor he contended was inconsistent with the Bendel State Local Government Edict 1976, which stipulated that an inquiry must be conducted before any local government could be dissolved and that such wholesale dissolution of the entire third tier of government was not in any way envisaged by the 1979 Constitution (Ola 1983:148).

The 1989 and 1999 Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria obviously do not also envisaged this kind of situation. Yet, it happened again in the Fourth Republic. After the three-year tenure of the elected local government councils lapsed in 2002, local government elections were not conducted until throughout the length and breadth of

the country until 2004. Though elections to local councils are already overdue, there are no plans to hold elections until December 2007.

Thus, the Federal Government did not take the appropriate steps to ensure the materialization of the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils guaranteed by the 1979 Constitution between 1979 and 1983 and between 2001 and 2003 and again in 2007 because it suited the ruling elites at the Federal level (Adamolekun 2007:17). These lapses on the part of the Federal Government created an opportunity for the State Governments to run the affairs of the Local Government Councils through appointed Caretaker Committees across the country.

On the whole it may be said that the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils guaranteed by the Constitution could not be brought to fruition because the higher levels of government used the third tier of government as a political chariot for the furtherance of their political goals.

### **Concluding Comments**

The ecological approach in public administration purports to study the interaction between the administrative system and its environment and thus would analyse the way each of them affects the other's behaviour (Arora 1972:118). This paper has highlighted the relevance and influence exercised by different ecological aspects on Nigerian local government. Collectively these aspects constitute the milieu in which local government institutions have been operating in the country. The milieu is peculiarly prismatic, characteristic of developing countries. It has proved conducive neither to healthy growth of local bodies nor to their proper role performance in relation to macro-level processes of developments. This situation corroborates the hypothesis of Riggs that the character of local government interacts in a circular fashion with its total environment so as to reinforce whatever tendencies prevail (Riggs 1964:373).



The environmental spectrum of local government in Nigeria has three major parts; fluid national polity, heterogeneous poly-normative society and imbalanced fluctuating economy. Interacting at the local level, it has manifested itself in a system of local government which is marked by institutional fragility, particularistic orientations and economics of non-viability. The prevailing system of local government has proved to be incapable of contributing to the realization of nation and state-building goals. It has not been helpful in strengthening the roots of democracy at the base of the society, nor has it been instrumental in promoting homogeneity, egalitarianism and secularism among the localities. Its administrative infirmity has also not enabled it to subserve the welfare and developmental goals at the micro level. Thus the interactional pattern between the local government system and its ecological system has mutually reinforced each other's malignant features.

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**APPENDIX I: NUMBER OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS IN EACH OF THE 36  
STATES IN NIGERIA**

STATE	CAPITAL	LGA	(NO)
1.	ASIA	UMUAHIA	17
2.	ADAMAWA	YOLA	21
3.	AKWA IBOM	UYO	31
4.	ANAMBRA	AWKA	21
5.	BAUCHI	BAUCHI	20
6.	BAYELSA	YENEGOA	8
7.	BENUE	MAKURDI	23
8.	BORNU	BORNU	27
9.	CROSS RIVER	CALABAR	18
10.	DELTA	ASABA	25
11.	EBONYI	ABAKALIKI	13
12.	EDO	BENIN	18
13.	EKITI	ADO - EKITI	16
14.	ENUGU	ENUGU	17
15.	GOMBE	GOMBE	15
16.	IMO	OWERRI	27
17.	JIGAWA	.DUTSE	27
18.	KADUNA	KADUNA	23
19.	KANO	KANO	44
20.	KATSINA	KATSINA	34
21.	KEBBI	BIRNIN-KEBBI	21
22.	KOGI	LOKOJA	21
23.	KWARA	ILORIN	16
24.	LAGOS	IKEJA	20
25.	NASSARAWA	LAFIA	13
26.	NIGER	MINNA	25
27.	OGUN	ABEOKUTA	20
29.	ONDO	AKURE	18
29.	OSUN	OSOGBO	30
30.	OYO	IBADAN	33
31.	PLATEAU	JOS	17
32.	RIVERS	PORT-HARCOURT	23
33.	SOKOTO	SOKOTO	23
34.	TARABA	JALINGO	16
35.	YOBE	DAMATURU	17
36.	ZAMFARA	GUSAU	14
FCT	ABUJA	6	
TOTAL	224		