At the UN MDG+10 High-Level Summit in September 2010 Nigeria will showcase a new initiative to make achieving the MDGs at grassroots a reality. The Local Government Initiative is a unique approach to the challenge of harnessing and coordinating efforts to achieve the MDGs across Nigeria’s 774 local governments, 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory.

The Federal Government cannot achieve the MDGs alone. The new initiative recognises the crucial role that local governments play in delivering public services to achieve the MDGs, especially in education, health and agriculture. Empowering local governments – equipping them with the technical and financial resources they need – and strengthening partnerships between the three tiers of government, will speed progress towards the MDGs.

Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Nigeria vary enormously in size and face diverse development challenges. But the aspiration to achieve the MDGs is universal. The new Local Government Initiative will scale-up investments in 113 local governments where MDG indicators point to particular challenges.

Builds on the successful Conditional Grants Scheme

The new initiative builds on the Conditional Grants Scheme (CGS), launched in 2007. The CGS encourages state governments to invest in projects that will help meet the MDGs. The CGS proved remarkably successful for several reasons. States had to match the funds provided by the CGS with their own funds. This gave states a stake in projects and the motivation to implement them properly. States were also required to fully and clearly account for expenditures. This encouraged transparency and discouraged corruption, as well as strengthening state accounting systems.

Connects the three tiers of government

Although the CGS proved successful, challenges did arise at the local level. The capacity to take on board best practice and sustain projects over time was weak.

The new initiative decentralises planning and funding. This means the different levels of government will collaborate closely to coordinate roles and responsibilities. The Federal Government will provide funds and technical support, and leverage the contributions from development partners.

In the states, planning commissions, departments for local government and government service commissions will help put in place policies, guidelines and human resources to make the initiative work smoothly.

Local governments, working with communities, will assess needs and source local counterpart funding. They will also be responsible for drawing up plans that align with achieving the MDGs, and state and national development strategies. Not least, local governments will build their planning, budgeting and accounting systems by participating in the initiative.

Empowers local governments to deliver better public services

The requirements of the new initiative recognise the crucial role local governments have in delivering public services. The aim is
to empower them to play this role effectively and assume more responsibility. For example, they can access grants to improve primary schools, teaching standards, and staffing and supplies in health care centres. This bottom-heavy approach focuses efforts where they are needed most and where they can quickly make a difference.

Governments consulted widely in choosing the 113 LGAs to be included in the first round of funding. Important criteria, apart from slow progress towards MDG targets, were the willingness of chairpersons and communities to fully back local efforts to achieve the MDGs, the ability to properly account for funds and the likelihood that grants will make a significant difference in speeding progress.

Engages 20 million Nigerians

Communities will play an important role by helping to set priorities and being involved in managing and sustaining projects. Engaging community and religious leaders and traditional rulers will be a crucial strategy in ensuring that as public service are improved they are fully used by local communities.

Leverages other initiatives

The new initiative will particularly target health and education but, to ensure a holistic approach to the MDGs, will leverage on other schemes such as the Universal Basic Education Fund and Ecological Fund, state agricultural sector investments and development partner programmes.

Leveraging other initiatives will be important in drawing efforts together while focusing on specific local needs. The Earth Institute at Columbia University, for example, has been engaged to help local governments assess needs, identify high-impact interventions, and set up real-time data management systems.

Learning from the UN Millennium Villages Project

The UN Millennium Villages Project shows that integrating investments across different sectors can very quickly make a big difference to communities and to progress on the MDGs.

The approach can be easily replicated and makes tracking investments much simpler. The intensive use of data makes fine tuning plans and measuring outcomes possible.