

E-GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The innovation in ICTs and the resulting emergence of the internet were strong drivers for shifting to an information era from the industrial age. In this movement, nations found succour in using information technologies for service delivery and this becomes the most significant epoch in the history of governance transformation. Despite the huge commitment of the government towards the e-government project in Nigeria, significant growth is not yet recorded on the use of ICT in governance as evidenced in the 2018 recent ranking by the United Nations on e-Government global ranking and assessment, Nigeria was positioned on 143rd of the 193 United Nation Member States. This paper therefore sought to investigate the reasons for the poor performance in the sector. This was done through secondary data collected with a structured interview from ICT directors of eight (8) purposively selected Federal Agencies in Nigeria. With due use of thematic analysis of the interview data, the study found that the challenges confronting e-government implementation in Nigeria were national challenges such as infrastructural deficiency, ICT illiteracy in addition to peculiar challenges like data privacy, security concerns. The paper thus concluded that unless these problems are tacked, the likelihood of having a successful e-government implementation outing in Nigeria would remain a mirage.

Keywords: E-Government; Public Service Delivery; e-Public Services; ICT; Innovation

INTRODUCTION

Due to the forces of globalization, service delivery has become a key issue in the measurement of good governance and ultimately the legitimacy of governments. Public sector functions can summarily be categorized into three: Making of effective policies as instruments of collective choice, making political choices that protect the sovereignty of the state and the delivering of services (Kirlin, 1996; Lane, 2010). Therefore, the delivery of services effectively and efficiently continues to be one of the main rationales for the existence of any government. More so, by virtue of the increasing responsibility of the public-sector in-service delivery, attention is therefore shifting away from what service to deliver to how they are been delivered (United Nations, 2014).

Over the years, the public sector faces diverse citizens needs coupled with weak economic base particularly in developing countries which opens door for unequal access to resources and services (Bertot, Estevez, & Janowski, 2016). In 2002, during the Joint Annual World Bank discussion held in Tokyo, World Bank President Jim Yong Kim remarked that “there is an urgent need for a science of delivery in development” (Fourie & Poggenpoel, 2017, p. 169). This poses a response to the overwhelming inefficiency and unequal access to services in developing worlds. Studies have enumerated some problems such as socio-economic and technological challenges,

lack of innovation, incentives and budgetary constraints and inability to identify citizens' needs as challenges facing the public sector in the delivery of public services (Erridge, Fee, & McIlroy, 1998; Lopes, Soares, Nielsen, & Tavares, 2017; Oyedele, 2015). The situation is grievous and more demanding in developing countries particularly in Africa due to weak institutional capacity to address pressing needs of the majority poor in the society (Omotoso, 2014). Therefore, the problem of inefficient, inequitable, limited access, low quality and ineffective public service delivery continues to generate discussions and practically remains unresolved, most especially in Africa (Ayee, 2008; Dza, Fisher, & Gapp, 2013; Gabel-Shemueli & Capell, 2013).

An ineffective public service constitutes a great barrier between the government and the people and denies the citizens the privilege to enjoy socio-economic development. Further than that, it has a fundamental implication in widening citizens-government relationship and declining public trust (Kampen, De Walle, & Bouckaert, 2006). Many public sector reforms have been carried out to correct this menace, but they do not significantly impact on the service delivery to the people due to corruption, bureaucratic bottlenecks, politically motivated reforms, disconnection between policy actors and the people among other reasons (Amukugo & Peters, 2016; Karim, 2015). Nigeria, despite its huge population and the abundant natural resources including an impressive Gross Domestic Product (GDP), more often referred to as the "giant of Africa", the level of public service delivery remains a big disappointment (Gberevbie, Iyoha, Ayo, Abasilim, & Ojeka, 2016; Oyedele, 2015). Therefore, as a result of the failed reforms carried out by the public sector in the past which have had little impact in the delivery of public services to the citizens, as well as the global trend of ICT, the government saw the need to venture into e-government which will focus on reorganizing the administrative bureaucracy as well as transform service delivery. This is because of the potential of ICT which has been introduced into the private sector and has transformed its operations. Similarly, ICT in public service delivery has been seen to work in developed countries as well as some developing countries such as South Africa (Mawela, Twinomurinzi, & Ochara, 2017), Malaysia (Alhabshi, 2011; Siddiquee & Mohamed, 2015), South Korea (Luo & Chea, 2018; Ramli, 2017) and India (Basu, 2004; Kumar, Sachan, & Mukherjee, 2018).

E-government has been viewed as an institutional mechanism to spur efficiency, effectiveness and equity in the public sector in order to attain improved public service delivery (Cordella & Iannacci, 2010; Zouridis & Thaens, 2003). The use of ICT for service delivery has gained considerable attention in both academic and professional writings lately (Fakhoury & Aubert, 2017; Larsson & Grönlund, 2014). Therefore, Nigeria adopted e-government with the establishment of National Information and Telecommunication Agency (NITDA) and the enactment of the National Information Technology Policy (Abdulkareem, Ameen, & Ishola, 2016). The implementation was made possible with ICT revolution which started in the early 2000s. The objective was to place government services online to enable efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability. Since its adoption, some government services can now be assessed online such as the application for e-passport, processing of driver's license, registration of National Examinations such as Joint Admission and Matriculations Board examinations, filing of tax returns, registration for National Identity Cards etc.

Some empirical investigations have observed that the public sector, can benefit more from the positive impact of e-government, it doesn't only help in the reorganization of the internal bureaucracies but also ensure effectiveness, efficiency and equity in the delivery of services (G.

Singh, Pathak, Naz, & Belwal, 2010). Based on the foregoing, Nigeria has a lot to gain from the potential of e-government; however, the implementation has not reached optimum capacity to generate that full multiplier effect in the public sector reform (Nchuchuwe & David, 2016). Although e-government is growing in Nigeria in a slow but steady fashion, the emergence of General System for Mobile communication (GSM) network in 2001 contributed to the economic growth of the country. According to the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC), the tele density of the country is growing at a tremendous rate (Ojebode et al., 2017). It was estimated to be above 110 per cent in 2017. However, the ripple effects of these performances have not trickled down to the citizens who are in dire need of a replica of private sector values derived from service delivery. Almost four in five households had mobile phones in 2015; this includes 90 per cent of urban homes and 71 per cent of rural ones. However, based on the E-government Development Index of United Nations Development Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Nigeria scored 0.3291 and ranked in the lower middle class with the likes of Kenya, Iran, Maldives and Indonesia (United Nations, 2016). Therefore, almost twenty years into the adoption of e-government for the delivery of public services, it becomes imperative to highlight issues and challenges facing e-government and e-public service delivery in Nigeria.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Conceptualization of E-government

E-government does not have a single unified definition as various researchers have attempted to define it based on their perspectives (Ndou, 2004) because it entails broad meaning and understanding which is more often than not influenced by the context of the discussion, environment, the stakeholders involved and specific government policies in place (Ali, 2017; Heeks & Bailur, 2007). The concept is multidimensional; for some, it is a concept that has functional effects or influence on the society (Nam, 2018; Peterson & Seifert, 2002) while for some, it is a public sector reform tool (Kochanova, Hasnain, & Larson, 2017; Yildiz, 2007). Ultimately, what is important to note is that e-government is advanced to fundamentally change the manner of working and thinking in the public sector.

E-government promises to provide manifold game-changing advantages (Wirtz, Piehler, & Daiser, 2015). One of the main objectives of e-government, which is the use of information and communication technology to disseminate information from one sector to another, is being projected by various nations in the global community. Although there are disparities in the implementation process of e-government in various nations. Yet, similar reasons can be established for e-government adoption world over. e-Government has emerged as a viable means to address development issues and challenges because citizens find empowerment through access to information. Emerging developing economies such as Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia have embarked upon e-government initiatives to provide a just, fair and equitable governance environment to the governed and they have achieved tremendous success (Dhamodharam & Saminathan, 2011).

Benefits of E-government

In a more literal sense, Albeshar and Brooks (2014) opined that e-government provides citizens, organizations, and government itself with a number of benefits, such as enhancing accountability, transparency, and responsiveness of government agencies and helps in saving time and costs. Similarly, e-government is expected to allow for less corruption, provides increased transparency, affords greater convenience, improves revenue and reduces costs (A. Singh & Sharma, 2009). While commenting on the United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN) Survey, Ayanso, Chatterjee, and Cho (2011) held that given the all-encompassing nature of the effect that ICT can have, the survey envisages ICT as ushering in “connected governance” that increases efficiencies of intra-governmental linkages, resulting in better service delivery and enhanced citizen participation in governance. Thus, e-government is not just about digitizing existing bureaucratic processes. It should rather be a transformation of e-business models onto the public sector and in terms of how governments operate (Wirtz & Daiser, 2015).

E-government and Public Service Delivery

This age of globalization thereby requires that government world over changes and improves the mode of interacting and providing services to the citizens. More so, there are pressures growing from the citizens demanding services to be provided online due to the stage of technological advancement (Accenture, 2004). Apart from citizens’ pressure, international pressures on governments locally cannot be ignored as well, countries are being pressurized to join in the e-economy and be part of the global market (Ifinedo & Davidrajuh, 2005). Therefore, the emergence of e-Government emanated from the need for improving government’s internal efficiency in terms of administration and establishing a quality mode of providing information and services [to the people] (Fountain, 2001). Furthermore, governments around the world are introducing e-government as a means of reducing costs, improving services for citizens and increasing effectiveness and efficiency at national, regional and local levels of the public sector (Alshehri & Drew, 2010). Dhamodharam and Saminathan (2011) also held that the overall aim of e-government project is to have SMART governance, which means: Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent governance. In addition to access to information and services, the internet also offers opportunities for new kinds of two-way communication between the citizens and the government (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011). Conclusively, E-government has therefore been proposed to improve the public service interaction level and build the trust deficit between government and the citizens (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

Challenges to E-government Implementation

Denhardt & Denhardt (2009) noted that while e-government offers many opportunities for better information sharing, efficiency, and better service to citizens, there also exist significant challenges that affects its growth. Thus, regardless of how advanced is a country in terms of ICT infrastructure and deployment, many technical and non-technical obstacles must be faced in the adoption and dissemination of e-government (Colesca, 2009). E-government implementation in developing countries are usually plagued by several factors. For instance, Srivastava and Teo (2006)

highlighted misplacement of priority as a significant challenge to the effective implementation of e-government. Similarly, Alshehri & Drew, (2010) accounted for ICT infrastructural deficiency as part of the technological difficulties that government agencies face in their adoption of internet for service delivery. As part of technical challenge, Ajayi (2007) raised concern of power and electricity concern particularly in Africa as a major reason for poor implementation and usage of e-government. According to Dhamodharam & Saminathan, (2011) and Adeyemo (2011), low IT literacy in developing countries account for a significant factor in slow implementation of e-government. While Davies (2015); Alsheri & Drew, (2010) Colesca, (2009) all raised concerns regarding privacy and security of data of implementing agencies as well as e-government users. Weak legal frameworks gave birth to the abuse of privacy of e-government users.

Transparency and Accountability in Service Delivery

The impact of transparency and accountability on service delivery has always been an underlying idea in the literature on service delivery (Anuradha, 2010). Since government engages public resources in the provision of social services to the populace, a reasonable measure of regular reporting (accountability) is therefore required to show to the citizens that their joint resources have been effectively used. Through accountability, transparency is established. Furthermore, when public services are provided in a professional and proper manner and do so at the lowest possible cost. This adds to the trust and strengthens the foundations of society (Eigeman, 2007).

The concerted and deliberate attempt by governments to make information or processes that were previously opaque in the public domain, accessible for use by citizen groups, providers or policymakers can be defined as transparency initiatives. Initiatives for transparency can be proactive or reactive disclosure by the government (Anuradha, 2010). Another set of claims is that transparency and accountability lead to increased responsiveness on the part of providers; improved access and quality of services; and consequently better developmental outcomes (Anuradha, 2010). Eigeman (2007) further submitted that quality and affordable service delivery is a condition for the good image of government.

Effective and efficient internal processes directly affect the quality of service delivery, the value of products and services and the cost-effectiveness of an organization's day-to-day operations should be considered. Ideally, service delivery should continuously adapt to changing users, user demands, user capacity and external drivers such as new technologies or advances in science. Hence the adoption of ICTs in governance to satisfy the dual aim of internal efficiency, real-time transparency and accountability in service delivery, as well as catching up with the technological environment.

Public Service Delivery in Nigeria

Nigeria is a country of conservatively 180 million populations which placed it as the most populous country in Africa and account for about 47% of the entire West African population (World Bank, 2016). With over 300 ethnic groups and each of them with their own distinct language and culture, there is vast diversity; the country therefore practices federal system of government (Rasul & Rogger, 2018). Each of the different layers operates an independent public service and delivers services at different levels based on constitutional arrangement. The Nigerian public service is as

old as the country and a product of the British colonial government (Omitola, 2012) to support the British government in the exploitation and exploration of the country's resources (Barkan, Gboyega, & Stevens, 2001; Olowu, Otobo, & Okotoni, 1997).

Nigeria's independence in 1960 was ushered in with great aspirations of a new state that will provide socio-economic goods for its teeming population, disappointingly, the Nigerian public service was unable to perform optimally to provide effective delivery of services (Olaopa, 2008). It has over the years unable to function as the government policy driver to deliver services and promote socio-economic development, having a long history of woeful performance and disappointment (Magbadelo, 2016). The level of decay in the public sector showed that service delivery in the public sector is not comparable with what is obtainable in the private sector. The resultant effect of this is evidenced in the soaring rate of poverty, inequality, poor access to education and health services as well as widened gap between the citizens and government thereby creating public trust gap (Abdulkareem, 2015).

In view of the extant criticisms of the poor service delivery performance of the Nigerian Public Service, reforms have become imperative which would direct and reshape the public sector into more customer friendly, more output- and consumer-driven (Ikeanyibe, 2016; Okon, 2015). Successive regimes have embarked on reforms to address the challenges earlier highlighted.

However, despite the fact that most of the reform policies introduced could have impacted positively in the public service most especially in the bid to transform service delivery, they however failed to achieve the required objectives due to corruption in the public service, inconsistency and lack of continuity in reform policy frameworks, implementation gap, lack of effective monitoring/evaluation, contradiction between reform policy decisions and policy targets and political interferences (Ajibade, Ibieta, & Ayelabola, 2017). It should be noted however that, due to the failure of most of these reform policies in transforming service delivery in Nigeria, the government deem it fit to introduce ICT (Ikeanyibe, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Primary data sourced through qualitative methodology was adopted for this study. In furtherance to this, a well-structured interview questions were administered on the ICT Directors of eight federal government agencies championing the e-government project in Nigeria. Their responses were analysed using thematic analysis to reveal the challenges of e-public service delivery in Nigeria with a broad view of highlighting the major problems of e-government in Nigeria. To achieve this, data for this study were collected from the directors of the ICT unit of eight (8) purposively selected federal agencies that championed the pioneering of e-government implementation project in Nigeria. More importantly, their selection was based on the ground that they constitute the foremost online public service delivery agencies in Nigeria and this category of staff is justified on the ground that they are the people more involved in e-government implementation at the level of the Agencies. They as well possess a better understanding of the complexities of the questions to be asked. In qualitative research where interview is the primary mode of data collection, the interviewer needed to reach the level of saturation in the interview sessions. Each interview session lasted an average of 30 minutes as the longest interview lasted for 42 minutes while the shortest was 25 minutes. The findings from the interview were analysed

with traditional technique using thematic analysis. This analysis required that the sourced responses be categorized into themes as relevant to the study objectives. Arising from the thematic categorization of the responses, the needed data for achieving the study objectives were gotten.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the interview sessions, respondents provided responses to the challenges they face in the delivery of public services electronically. Some of the challenges highlighted were general and national issues while some are peculiar to their respective organizations. Almost all the agencies highlighted similar challenges confronting their agencies in performing their duties.

Unstable Power Supply

All the respondents agreed that there are certain challenges that transcend all organisations or agencies and one of such is the issue of unstable power supply. Successive government regimes have dedicated substantial funds to this cause without a sustainable positive result. This submission tallies with that of Ajayi (2007) who explained that businesses in Nigeria could not rely on the public power supply. Some companies and citizens had resorted to “operate on Generator and put the public power supply on standby” which is very expensive.

ICT Illiteracy

The menace of ICT illiteracy has curtailed the extent to which citizens patronise e-public service delivery as the platform demands either basic computer skills from a would-be service seeker or the engagement an intermediary to assist the service seeker access the online services. From this perspective, all respondents decried the emerging avenue for extortion where the sought hands end up inflating the cost of government services for the users or tampered with the platform in a deliberate attempt to frustrate the service seekers. This sabotage is to force the service seeker to request for an alternative means that will accommodate extortion or other forms of benefit to the intermediary. To corroborate the above submission, the researcher also observed that most of the people having business with for example at the National Immigration Service ends up visiting their office to seek assistance as the online platform is usually inactive or not responding as it should be. In a related scenario, the researcher also observed a similar case at the Corporate Affairs Commission office where special counters were designated for cash payment in negation of the online fund payment that is one of the cardinal mandates of the agency. More noticeable is the unhindered scampering for client at the office where staff pestered visitors in the disguise of helping them to smoothen the process in return for a pantry sum.

The situation above becomes unavoidable, as majority of the service users are ICT illiterate while intermediaries hide in that space to feed fat on the system. In corroborating this perspective, Dhamodharam & Saminathan (2011), Adeyemo (2011) opined that the emerging trend in literacy now encompass to be able to read, write and use the computer. Following this paradigm, Adeyemo stressed that low information technology literacy is tantamount to illiteracy and that ICT illiteracy

in Nigeria is very alarming as it slows down the process of e-Government implementation and success.

Infrastructural Inadequacies

In addition to the national challenge is the issue of infrastructural inadequacies that is not peculiar to only the agencies but rather a national dilemma. The respondents at the NCS zonal office in Ilorin, Nigeria described the state of infrastructure in the agency as that of “a mother that deliberately suffocates the kids”. This he upheld by asserting that all significant ICT infrastructure are stationed in Abuja and Lagos and that customers’ complaints must be forwarded there for attention instead of spontaneous remedy at the zone.

Apart from the inadequate ICT facilities, supporting furniture and fittings are also grossly inadequate as commented by the all the respondents. They buttressed that at many instances, units must support the provided public infrastructure with their personal fund as clearly visible in the use of their personal computers to replace the obsolete computers in their units. More direct was the comment of the NIMC Director who stated that most of their computer hardware are due for upgrading and replacement every four (4) years but in the actual sense, this has not taken place since their establishment in the year 2007.

Corruption

The extent to which corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of the nation is so alarming that all the selected agencies acknowledged the emergence of a new approach to corrupt tendencies in the e-government drive. Leading this argument was the Director of ICT unit in National Youth Service Corps who held that repeated changes on Corps member posting usually occur overnight. He cited a case of a woman that approached one of his staff with request for relocation without any substantive reason as demanded by the agency to which the staff took down her details but later declined the request. He explained that a few days after, while taking inventory of their corps members on the internet, the person in question has been relocated with the login parameter of a senior member of the agency in Abuja. Similarly, in support of this is the observed conduct at the Nigerian Immigration Service office where people are charged more than actually required by law with the promise of assisting them to facilitate International Passport process. Nigerian Customs Service, Federal Road Safety Corps, National Agency for Foods and Drugs Administration Control and Federal Inland Revenue Service directors all asserted that despite the e-government implementation, many staff still device ways of taking the business of the government off the internet to create a means of self-aggrandisement.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at investigating the challenges militating against effective electronic public service delivery in Nigeria. This quest stemmed from the perceived improvement expected of e-government implementation project in view of the heavy fund committed to it by the government over the years. Contrarily, rankings by international organisations like the UN has presented a

contradicting result. With reliance on secondary data collected from the directors of ICT units of the eight e-government, the paper found that the challenges can be sectioned into national and peculiar challenges. In generalizing the findings, the national challenges revolved around problems that extended to all agencies even outside the eight agencies under investigation. These are problems that are organizationally based but rather, found across all the agencies for example, unstable electricity supply, ITC illiteracy, and poor network infrastructure. The peculiar challenges on the other hand refers to the specific challenges that affects only particular organisation. For instance, the FRSC complained of the challenges arising from multiplicity of information sources that always compounded their response to complaints on driver license registration process. However, these challenges are surmountable if the basic ICT infrastructure is provided to all agencies while significant attention is equally paid to eliminating the peculiar organizational challenges found in each agency.

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