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## **E-government and the Quest for Transparent Public Service in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Successive governments in Nigeria have been undertaking different administrative reforms and considerable efforts in order to make the Nigerian Public Service transparent and accountable to the citizens. This is in recognition of transparency as one of the key elements of good governance as it allows public insight in the activities of the government and its agencies and also enables them to monitor and control the decision-making process. In recognition of the importance of transparency to quality service delivery, many advanced countries have adopted Information Communication Technologies in their public services to strengthen the relationships between government and the citizens and allow the latter track the activities, and oversee the behaviours of public office holders. In this regard, e-government has been found to increase citizens' access to governmental information and thus, able to track the decisions and actions of government. The aim of this study is to interrogate the adoption of e-government in Nigeria for a transparent public service. The work reveals that the continuous diffusion of the Internet and mobile technologies, a concomitant of the democratization of the telecommunication space following the Telecommunication Act (2003), has increased citizens' accessibility and usage of ICTs. The growing acceptance and usage of ICTs in the country thus signal the potential of e-government as a tool for enhancing openness in the Nigerian Public Service. The question now is whether the growth in ICT has really translated to transparency in the Nigeria's public sector and service delivery especially in rural areas.

**Keywords:** e-government, transparency, public service, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Transparency in the public sector is imperative for accountability and is considered a hallmark of democratic government. Holders of Public offices particularly in a democratic government are expected to expend public resources in an open and transparent manner. In recent years therefore, the need for transparent governance has gained worldwide attention and nations across the world are adopting strategies and reformations to ensure that their public administration are transparent and accountable to the citizens (Danjuma, 2014).

Countries around the world are becoming technologically inclined in administration (Oni, Mbarika, Oni and Ayo (2017)). Information and communication technology is seen as a cost effective means to reduce corrupt practices and increase transparency and accountability. A government that wants to remain relevant to its citizens must therefore, introduce the e-government tools and implement them

(Mundy and Musa, 2010). Moreover, citizens have seen the importance of ICT in the private sector and how information is easily accessible and the whole management process transparent and are now requesting that their government adopt these techniques into administration. Governments that embrace transparency produce and make available information to the public more than any other government (Lord, 2006). The developed nations of the world like United State of America, United Kingdom have adopted e-government tools for a transparent and accountable government (Zouridis and Thaens, 2003).

Nigeria has the fastest growing information and communication technology market in Africa and in order to explore the potentials of ICT as the motor for sustainable advancement and worldwide competitiveness, the Nigerian Government endorsed the Nigerian National Information Technology (IT) Policy in 2001. Several years after, the country is ranked low in transparent governance. Despite the huge investment by the Nigerian government in its e-government vision for accountable, transparent and efficient public service, the country still ranks low in e-government service. This study on this basis therefore examines the potentials of ICT to serve as an additional and more effective tool for achieving transparent Nigeria's public sector. It also interrogates the fundamental challenges inhibiting the use of ICT to achieve transparency in the country's public sector.

### **E-Government and Transparency: A review of literature**

The need to confront the complexity of modern politics to bring about public transformation signaled the utilization of ICTs in public administration and became known as e-government (Corojan, and Criado, 2012). E-government can be defined as government online. As noted by Zouridis and Thaens (2003), e-government implies that governments and governance become online. For Corojan and Criado (2012), e-Government involves utilizing information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve the activities of public sector organizations. These activities include interactions between government and business (G2B), government and citizens (G2C), government and employees (G2E), government and government (G2G). Perri (2004) identifies four areas of activity in e-government namely e-service provision, e-governance, e-democracy and e-management. He also addresses the relationships amongst these areas. E-service provision is centered on government and private bodies, under contract, delivery services through digital network or media. These services could be individual citizen license, application for permits and licenses, providing information for the public, issuing of licenses online, receiving and storing captured biometric information, collection of tax and regulatory fees. These services are processed online in order to improve service delivery.

For Corojan and Criado (2012), e-government refers to utilizing information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve the activities of public sector organizations. In this regards, e-Government alludes to the utilization by government organizations of data advancements, (for example, Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and versatile processing) that can change relations with nationals, organizations, and different arms of government. These innovations can serve a wide range of finishes: better conveyance of taxpayer supported organizations to residents, enhanced co-operations with business and industry, national strengthening through access to data, or more productive government administration. The subsequent advantages can be less defilement, expanded straightforwardness, more prominent accommodation, income development, or potentially cost diminishments" (World Bank, 2012). United Nations (2012) defined E-government as using the internet and the World Wide Web for providing government based information and services to its citizens. Without internet access, such information cannot be viewed or accessed by the citizens. In addition, Baum and Maio (2000) defined government online as the use of technology, internet and the new media in producing continuous service delivery, participation and governance through internal and external relations. Though these definitions vary, there is a common focus. It involves the use of ICT, particularly the internet, in improving service delivery from the government to its citizens, business and other governments. E-government improves interaction of government and other actors in the society. It is also aimed at minimizing any form of corruption and improves transparency. The main goal of E-government is that of better service delivery, political participation of the citizen and better administration of government. Perri (2004) further enunciated political activities that e-government can help to improve. According to him, e-government is the activity for policy

formulating online and the examination and supervision of the success of policy goals. It starts from identifying policy problems, use of tools or techniques to solve policy problems and developing several policies that will assist ministers and mayors which will increase performance. E-democracy is the whole activities of government, the perspectives of citizens, businesses and other organisations on issues of legislative change to the tweaking of administration of service and programmes to meet the worries of current buyers. E-management is the activity of allocating resources within government agency as stipulated by the policy made through digital means. According to Corojan and Criado (2012), e-government the development of e-government is aimed at addressing transparency, anti-corruption and accountability democratic dimensions of political systems. In this regards, e-government has the potential to improve transparency, accountability and thus capable of reducing corruption in the public sector. Recent developments have seen many governments increasing openness and transparency in their activities. This is in a bid to reduce corruption and mitigate public mistrust of government (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010).

Transparency is a principle of public administration that involves knowing the reasons, details, logics and base of the decision taken by the administration. According to Corojan and Criado (2012), a government is transparent when there exists, institutions that make available sufficient information about public affairs openly without opacity. In this regards, citizens have easy and convenient access information that allows them have adequate knowledge and make informed judgments on the functioning and performance of their political institutions. Transparency is therefore, the relationship between political actors and the citizens in the provision of information, accountability of the government to its citizens and the political participation of the citizenry. Transparency in administration connotes that citizens have the fundamental right to have free access to information about government's action (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010). According to Saremi and Mohammadi (2015), transparency is the accessibility of information freely by citizens directly affected by government decisions or actions. In other words, people who are being affected by the decision taken by public officers are to be in the know of every activities and actions to be carried out. Hood (2001) defines administrative transparency as acting according to published rules, based on information that is accessible for the public, under the presupposition that it secures good governance. For Armstrong (2005), it is the unfiltered information provided to the public freely and on time, on any decision and performance in the public sector. The main aim of transparency in the public sector is for good governance. When government's activities are being accessible by its citizen, it then gives room for easy running of administration. As posited by Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010), the essence of transparency is to keep government honest as good government must not only be done but be seen to be done. In this regards, e-government is seen to reduce the cost of collecting and distributing and also enhance accessibility of government information to promote transparency, accountability and anti-corruption goals. Gambo (2002) defines corruption as illegality of any form that serves individuals or groups self-centered purpose. It entails any act that results in the violation of laid down rules, principles and procedures of doing things in order to gain some selfish advantages. Corruption is any act that is not in accordance with the laid down rules and regulations, norms and beliefs of the people especially where the act is done for selfish aggrandizement. Corruption includes, crimes against justice, fair play and social integrity or moral rectitude as stealing, fraud, illegal conversion, gratification of any kind to prevent justice, adulteration, counterfeiting, lying, propaganda, misleading advertisement, prostitution and other forms of sex abuse, drug abuse, infidelity to promises, plagiarism in scholarship, sexual harassment of children, servants, wards or students, examination malpractice and other forms of deception (Toyo, 1997).

### **The Dilemma of Transparency in Nigerian Public Service**

Transparency has been a major issue in the Nigerian public service. There are various strategies aimed at ensuring transparency in Nigeria but it has yielded little or no efforts as most government activities are not open to the public (Gberevbie, Ayo, Oni & Folarin, 2014). The lack of transparency in Nigeria has caused several damages. Among these is corruption. Corruption has to be the biggest damage caused by the absence of transparency initiatives in the public sector. A government that is not transparent has every tendency to become corrupt as their activities or action cannot be monitored or questioned. The lack of transparency in Nigeria's public sector is the reason for the high rate of corruption in the country (The Punch Newspaper, 2004; Gberevbie, Ayo, Oni & Folarin, 2014).

Nigeria is a democratic nation but lack of transparency has made government of the country rule in a coercive manner. Nigerian government has become dictators because of lack of respect for institutions that promote transparency and accountability in its democratic institutions (Vanguard Newspaper, 2018). Transparency has close ties to the economy. Transparency reduces the issue of embezzlement of funds, helps in proper management of revenue, increases the government's treasury and closes any form of wastage. In Nigeria, due to the lack of transparency, public servants are caught embezzling funds and turning public funds to personal gains which affect the economy of the country (Gberevbie, Ayo, Oni & Folarin, 2014).

### **Transparency in Nigerian Public Service: Imperative of E-Government**

Countries in Africa have not been able to structure their organizations or bureaucracies in such a way as to meet the demands of the ever growing information society and because of this, many of such governments are lagging behind in terms of accountability and transparency whereas other developed countries are already replacing these traditional organizations with e-government (Gberevbie, Ayo, Iyoha, Ojeka & Abasilim, 2016). Nigeria is one of such countries in Africa. In order for Nigeria to expand its economy, improve the educational sector, health and agriculture, the government introduced the National Information and Communication Technology Policy in 2003 (Asogwa, 2013). In 2003, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, the former president of Nigeria, explained that this policy was introduced to ensure that the country is part of the ever growing information society with emphasis on the partnership with the public and private sector. The National e-Government Strategies (NeGSts) was immediately setup to execute the objective of the National Information and Communication Technology Policy (Iyoha, Jinadu, Ayo, Gberevbie & Ojeka, 2016). For Nigeria, it was a great start in a period where other countries were already highly developed in ICTs. Ever since its adoption in Nigeria in 2000, ICTs have been identified as the fastest, rapidly and steadily growing sector. The Global System for Mobile communications (GSM), which is the first communication revolution, was brought into the country in 2001 with 400,000 lines and a dismal of 0.4 teledensity. Since the last two decades however, Nigeria has been witnessing a sporadic adoption and diffusion of ICTs in its public institutions. There are now over 90 million active lines in the country. Today Nigeria is one of the largest telecommunication communities in Africa and amongst the top ten in the world. Global System for Mobile communications has helped to make communication between people easier. ICTs growth has yielded benefits for the private sector as several data applications like m-commerce used to conduct business in the country, m-labour which used to find labour and m-banking used in commercial banking or retail banking, are now frequently used in the country (Gberevbie, Ayo, Iyoha, Ojeka & Abasilim, 2016). The Nigeria's public sector has also witnessing e-government adoption. In a bid for the government to have web presence, 'Getting Government Online' initiative was introduced. This initiative flagged up with Government Service Portal (GSP) and Government Contact Centre (GCC). Both services were introduced to improve the way government run their programs that should benefit citizens in service delivery. The Government Service Portal allows access to citizens and stakeholders in order to be aware of services provided by government agencies. The government of Nigeria now uses these telecommunication devices as a medium to pass very important messages or information to its citizenry, which could be on security, health, education and so on (Osinachi, 2011). The manual means of paying salary in the Nigerian Public Service has stopped and e-payment has been embraced. E-payment has helped the Nigerian government close any form of corrupt practices in terms of detecting "ghost" workers as civil servants and checking payment errors. E-payment is an electronic method of issuing payment within ministries, departments and agencies. Approval is first given electronically by employers before it reaches the bank. Banks then get instructions to communicate with other banks of which the accounts of their beneficiaries are documented (Ogedebe and Jacob, 2012). Taxes are also made through e-payment. E-payment has helped Nigerian government minimize the stress and risk of paying manually and also helped the government activities to be done more openly.

According to Aginam (2014), the creation of the Ministry of Communication and Technology has also led to many ministries, departments and agencies of government in the country to have web presence (.gov.ng). The government, through the ministry, aimed that ICTs would enhance transparency and efficiency in service delivery and administration and as well facilitates citizen participation and productivity (Aginam, 2014). Payment and processing for government services such

as drivers' license, International Passport etc., are now done online and the processing can be tracked online thus capable of reducing the level of administrative corruption in the country.

Pursuant to the adoption of e-government in the Nigeria's public sector, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) introduced the cashless policy in a bid to encourage e-payments and other options to cash. The policy aimed to among others, increase accessibility, transparency and convenience across the economy. Research has shown how citizens in the country prefer the cashless policy than the stressful manual banking system. Apart from this, issues like robberies, cybercrime, corruption, embezzlement, money laundering and improper management of treasury have been reduced (Ogedebe and Jacob, 2012). It can be seen from the foregoing that e-government implementation has recorded great success in Nigeria which has the potential of promoting transparency in service delivery and government administration in the country. It was also aimed to facilitate citizen participation and productivity (Aginam, 2014). Recently, Nigeria government under President Buhari has been working on the Government Contact Centres which aimed at providing a two way channel of communication between the government and its citizen. This initiative has the potential of creating more efficient way for the government to respond to requests by the citizen.

While the deployment of ICT is making impact in government agencies in urban centers, the story is not the same in rural areas of the country. As observed by Danfulani (2013), some Local Government headquarters are not even connected to Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) and other ICT facilities. In such places, they still rely heavily on manual way of transmitting and receiving messages. In such circumstance, people still lobby for speedy process of their files from one desk to another. This scenario gives room for corruption. Government clients like contractors still bribe their way through to get things done contrary to established rules and procedures (ITU News 2012).

There is serious deficit in the level of infrastructure that is placed in the rural areas compared to the urban areas despite the rural areas accounting for more than 60 per cent of the population. Most of the telecoms base stations are situated in the urban areas as noted before leaving the rural areas with little or no access to telecommunication facilities (Gberevbie, Ayo, Iyoha, Ojeka and Abasilim, 2016).

It is noted that the teledensity rate of Nigeria is as high as 90 per cent indicating that almost every Nigerian owns a mobile phone. E-government, however, goes beyond the use of mobile phones, it requires the presence and use of the internet to be able to access government electronic services. The level of internet usage in Nigeria is not encouraging due to low level of penetration most especially in the rural areas where education is low (Iyoha, Jinadu, Ayo, Gberevbie and Ojeka, 2016).

Another challenge to ICT in service delivery at the public sector is called Digital Divide. Digital divide is the difference in ICT access and usage between different regions that shares similar characteristics. In explaining digital divide in Nigeria, it can be perceived as the difference in the accessibility and usage of ICT services between the rural population and the urban population. Digital divide in Nigeria is caused by low level of literacy, poverty, infrastructural gap and high cost of internet connectivity (Abasilim and Edet, 2015).

Another major setback to e-government implementation in Nigeria is the fact that among government agencies connected to ICT facilities, as noted by Danfulani (2013), Abasilim and Edet (2015), information on their web site are not updated to meet current information required. Some officers in government offices are not well equipped in IT skills. They often find it difficult to answer questions forwarded to them by other agencies of government that are ICT compliant. This development affects inter-agency connectivity. Worse still, there are highly placed government officials and other officers without a simple knowledge of computer operation. In another parlance, it is called low IT skill manpower. Majority of public servants do not have the required level of knowledge in ICT to carry out the task of e-services. Thus the very few with ICT knowledge are overburdened with the huge tasks.

Epileptic power supply is another major obstacle to ICT driven public sector and a critical challenge disrupting the full success of e-government implementation in Nigeria. Electricity failure in some rural and urban areas is so chronic that some of them may experience power outage for days. Power

blackout is a regular phenomenon in most Nigerian cities, towns and villages with negative impacts on the robustness of ICT (Abasilim and Edet, 2015).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

It is no longer a gainsay that e-government can increase the responsiveness of government officials to citizens' information needs. Nations across the world now adopt e-government to promote public access, monitoring and tracking of government policy process, spending, services and other activities. Thus, with e-government, it is possible to identify and remove administrative corruption. In Nigeria, the use of e-government to increase public sector transparency is yet to be achieved despite the progressive adoption of ICTs by government institutions and agencies in the country. As observed by Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010), successful implementation of e-government is substantially determined by strong political will in ensuring e-government tools are available in the country, in committing to best practices in e-government implementation and in government officials' acceptability of the usage. As observed by Oni, Ayo, Oni and Mbarika (2016), e-government sustainability requires strong political will, a commitment to continuous investment among others. To achieve transparency in Nigerian Public Service through e-government, e-government tools particularly, the internet services have to be made available to the citizens at affordable cost. In doing this, government efforts must concentrate more on the rural areas where substantial percentage of people resides. E-government requires that citizen have online presence. In addition, extensive public sensitization programme on the benefits of e-government is imperative in addition to constantly organizing training programmes for public officials and citizens so they can operate or make use of e-government tools. Local Government staff as well as public sector employees should be trained and retrained to be ICT compliant while computer literacy should be made a requirement for promotion. With genuine commitment to e-government, tackling corruption in the country becomes much easier by making Nigeria public administration to be transparent and responsive. This will ultimately rebuild the dwindled public trust in the government. E-government will increase citizens' access to information, strengthen their capacity to participate in decision making process, enable them oversee the activities of country's bureaucracy and make it accountable to the public which are indispensable for the much expected quality public service delivery in Nigeria.

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