

E-Governance and Digital Service: Interrogating the Covid-19 Lesson for Nigeria Public Service Delivery

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the need for the implementation of E-governance towards enhancing digital services as a nexus to have reduced the effect of Covid-19 on Nigeria public service delivery. Consequently, the paper posit that the cardinal channel for public service delivery in Nigeria which have been paper based transactions, bureaucracy, face-to-face contact couldn't achieved much during the raging days of coronavirus. Public service delivery was near impossible due to the lockdown; there was a huge loss of man hour, income and revenue. Nations (Nigeria inclusive) suffered greatly as a result of the Covid pandemic infliction. In this context, the paper proposes the need for the government of Nigeria through her public service to embrace and implement e-governance to enable the provision of seamless, continuous and timely delivery of public services and marshal resources during times of disaster, pandemic or lockdown. Flowing from this, the paper extracts and examined the constitutive and apparent growing concern for the deployment of ICT vis-à-vis e-governance and digital services in developing nation's public service especially in Nigeria. To investigate the topic of concern, the researcher used qualitative research method to investigate the problem and collected data from secondary sources. The paper raised a host of questions and made some policy prescriptions.

Keywords: E-governance, Digital Service, Covid-19, Nigeria Public Service.

Introduction

In order to manage the relationships and share information, improve transparency, accountability, accessibility, and by removing barriers associated with Nigeria public services, it is pertinent to reduced delays across governmental machineries, agencies, departments, and ministries. E-governance and digital services signify the use of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. By using this imposed intelligence, shared government information among her agencies, enhanced network security solutions, government institutions and agencies will deliver digital services, platforms, and channels. E-governance can be instrumental to driving the digital future of the Nigeria public service. If implemented with proper enhancement, it can become a leading hub for digital transformation and innovations like what has happened in developed nations.

If government at all levels and their agencies are prepared to operate as enablers, the public service as a tool of the state would strive to deliver seamless digital services. Citizens' lives will be made easier by these digital government services, and the public sector will function effectively and efficiently. This is an

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essential step because, as the globe becomes more interconnected and global, public institutions must increasingly compete with one another to win businesses and support (Hajj, Zein, Al Askar, Al Marzooqi, & Darwish, 2021). Analogue system of public service delivery is no longer friendly and does not appeal to the global business community. Governmental organizations need strategies to step up their efforts and transition to e-governance and digitize public service delivery in order to achieve transformative and innovative public service delivery that is meant to meet global expectation in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. They must advance, in particular, beyond the idea of face-to-face service delivery that is characterized by red-tapism. Instead, the Nigeria public service need to advance technologically to the era of e-governance and digital services so that customers, clients, citizens and businesses do not have to seek their physical presence to request a service. Instead, individuals automatically receive the services for which they are qualified, with less effort required.

The Covid-19 in Nigeria on the other hand reinforced the urgency for digital service delivery in the Nigeria public service. This was evidence in the lockdown and social distancing which was meant to checkmate the spread of the coronavirus. The effect of this decision by the various levels of government in Nigeria was a total lockdown of the public service. Since the Nigeria public service is model on the face-to-face model of service delivery, unlike the developed nations were e-governance via digital service is the model. The public service was not affected because services were still rendering amidst the Covid-19 lockdown. Nigeria like most Africa countries witness a total hurt in service delivery in both private and public sectors. This was due to the absent of e-governance via digital service.

Government at all levels and their agencies must alter the way they create services if transformation and innovations in governance is to be successful. The public service must progressively, cumulatively, and in conjunction with all governmental institutions and agencies implement and improve the digital service platform that allows for effective and efficient service delivery. In particular, from strategy to implementation, all government bodies and departments must adopt new practices along the digital service delivery value chain. They must quickly develop brand-new, unified services for the public (Hajj, Zein, Al Askar, Al Marzooqi, & Darwish, 2021). On the ICT front, they need to establish platforms that facilitate the effective growth of e-governance and digital services.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is contend analysis. This implies that the researcher made used of data gotten from secondary source. That is, literature from journals, textbooks, online publications, etc. These data were further analyzed descriptively and a conclusion derived.

Conceptualization

E-governance: The way forward

Information and communication technology (ICT) is a set of platforms and applications that the public sector at large, as well as government at all levels, employs to deliver services. The government's digital capabilities and services, including artificial intelligence and block chain, are the emphasis of the e-governance infrastructure. To provide services including business licencing, debt registration, licence renewal, tax payment services, fee payment services, and payment for public utilities, governments use the e-governance infrastructure.

The public service through the instrumentality of E-governance must be prepared to lead the digital future of Nigeria like in developed countries of Europe, to provide services and create ecosystems that enhance the quality of life and increase prospects for economic and societal development. Additionally, via initiatives, policies, rules, and enterprise architecture for improved government performance, we will work to allow, support, and provide a digital government that is anticipatory, customized, collaborative, and secure.

Government in developing countries must not only stop at policies prescription but such policies must be seen to be implemented. All levels of government and their constitutive agencies must match their words with action the success of this will aimed at improving service delivery, driving innovation, as well as productivity among others.

The Digital Services: How Countries made their differences

Most governments especially in developed nations across the globe are competing on the ease of doing business and providing essential, quicker and digital services by its public service to encourage companies to open businesses in their countries. One of the most important factors and factors that companies take into account when determining where to locate is how simple and convenient it is to engage with the various government agencies, ministries, and departments. If developing countries (Nigeria inclusive) are to succeed in this contest, they should adopt the digital services approach in providing services as exemplify by Abu Dhabi, the Republic of Korea's, Singapore's eCitizen, Canada Site, etc. These countries carry out far better digital service delivery than the analogue face-to-face attendance to clients, citizens, etc. as practice today by Nigeria public service (Hajj et al., 2021). This form of service delivery is associated with extreme red tapism and administrative bottle neck

Abu Dhabi's administration has recently put a lot of effort into modernising and digitising its services. For instance, the government has created a single location where all services are available. It is known as "TAMM" and serves as the headquarters for all of Abu Dhabi Government Services' contact, digital, and service centres. TAMM has a large portfolio of more than 500 digital services and is based on a complete ecosystem of digital capabilities (Hajj et al., 2021). Additionally, 98 percent of services provided by the Abu Dhabi government are now offered online or through digital means like mobile apps. Government service fees are also largely collected electronically, with some jurisdictions reporting that the percentage is as high as 85%. All businesses, residents, and even tourists to Abu Dhabi benefit from these digital service advancements (Hajj et al., 2021).

One other illustration is the Republic of Korea's Open System, which enables the uploading of all administrative case processing procedures. Another excellent example of a nation's digital service implementation is Singapore's eCitizen portal, which offers the general public integrated and accessible customer-centric e-services and allows citizens to conduct full operations with the government without interacting with other departments separately. Also another efficient digital service is the portal Canada Site, which serves as the main Internet access point for thorough and current online information about the programmes and services provided by the Government of Canada (Szeremeta & Kerby, 2005).

Drawing from the above experiences of digital service delivery in developed nations, Nigeria and others government of developing nations should reposition their public service to learn to be proactive, ambitious and do more because citizens, clients, customers are looking forward to a more personalization of services. To handle service requests, governments in developing countries, including Nigeria, must do away with historical bureaucracy. As a result, governments should pay closer attention to how to transition from merely providing services to offering tools and apps that put the needs of the people first. This entails giving e-governance precedence in our public service in order to improve the lives of its residents. E-Government should be used to enhance how public employees use public resources to benefit society. The Head of Service of Nigeria recently announced a new vision for digital services that integrates various services to reduce needless redundancy of application processes for customers or businesses. Nigerians yearn for this improves service delivery.

The Covid-19 Experience

The COVID-19 pandemic experience in Nigeria like every other developing nations has reinforced the need to increase the momentum and focus on building and maintaining ICT infrastructure for the purpose of supporting e-governance and digital service implementation in Nigeria public service. The lockdown of the country vis-à-vis the social distancing declared then by the governments, meant the lockdown of

public service delivery because the public service in Nigeria depend on the face-to-face model of service delivery. This is not with the case of developed nations where e-governance and digital service was functional, their public service delivery were not in any way affected by the lockdown or social distancing. Public service delivery was still carried out seamlessly despite the lockdown.

The non-implementation of E-governance in Nigeria public service saw a worst scenario during Covid-19 as public service delivery almost came to a halt, man-working hour were lost, immediate jobs and income loss were also on the increase, Small and Medium Scale Enterprises suffered, poverty rate skyrocketed, the economy was at the verge of depression. The pandemic's devastating impact on the Nigerian entrepreneurs demonstrated the interdependence of the global economy at all scales, including in towns and villages. It had a negative impact on nearly all the sectors and industry, including tourism, aviation, sports, and proprietors of soccer league view facilities in Nigerian cities, towns, and even villages where spectators pay to see these matches (Ozili, 2020).

While most developed nations were counting their losses on the dead tolls of their citizens, majority of developing countries were rather counting their losses on the absence of almost all public service delivery.

E-governance: Its Peculiarities

Szeremeta & Kerby (2005) noted that there are barriers to effective implementation of e-governance especially in most developing nations. Such barriers are occasion by the following factors:

Leadership and Political Will

Nigeria has one of Africa's strongest economies and the biggest markets as a result of her size and population. However, persistent corruption in both, the public and commercial sectors, wavering government goals, and policy indecision have left the nation economically weak. This has prevented the nation from having the necessary resources to install all necessary e-governance equipment, train staff to operate the technology, and muster the political will to implement laws made by the legislature in response to the need for e-governance in the nation.

As a result, the majority of e-governance projects fail because the leaders do not have the political will and fully see the significance of the project's neither do they support it with all of their might. The majority of government servants won't support a project unless management is fully committed to it.

Infrastructure

Connectivity, bandwidth, networks, portals, data, and electricity make up infrastructure. The aforesaid restriction lowers the potential advantages of e-governance in the majority of developing nations. One of Nigeria's major issues, for instance, is the delivery of electricity. The efficiency of its contribution to electronic governance and digital services is still far from being resolved. The continuous lack of electricity in most States results in days without illumination. Since e-governance requires constant electricity use, it cannot be successful.

Access to the Internet

Nigeria has six geopolitical zones with a huge landmass. This makes the country a very big country. Most parts of the country are yet to be connected to any ICT facilities and the global system for mobile communications. Some local government areas administrative centers are still disconnected. As a result, a sizable portion of the nation is not covered by e-governance. Typically, citizens lack this access, knowledge, and time necessary to meaningfully contribute to policy concerns. A nation with a sizable population not involved in the ICT industry. We also have highly positioned government officials who are only capable of handling a little cell phone. This low level of knowledge of ICT and e-governance is still a problem for the full implementation of e-governance and digital services in the Nigeria public service.

Trust

Another issue that affects e-governance and ICT implementation is the lack of trust or confidence that results from bad content management on the part of the government, agencies, and organizations. Websites for ministries and parastatals might occasionally be information deserts with stale content that only serves the current purpose. Officers in charge of these units' lack competence in basic information management have an impact on how seamlessly the many agencies work together. This causes mistrust, and if the public feels that their opinions are not being taken seriously or that their government only seems to care, they will stop participating in future affairs. As a result, the government will need to invest more to earn back the public's confidence.

Financial Resources

E-governance and digital community activities are no different from other projects that requires huge financial support because they are capital intensive, in that they are doomed to failure if they are not fully supported. It's become worrisome if the government of the day gives the country's ICT development budgetary allocations that are very modest. A significant portion of society will be affected by the failure if there is no funding.

Poor Remuneration for IT Staff

The few competent IT workers who are now available in the nation are underpaid, therefore they search for better paying jobs in countries with more favourable economic conditions. This has led to the country's incapacity to implement innovations in e-governance and the ongoing decline in the number of IT staff (Ridwan, 2015).

Lack of Government IT Regulatory Policy

According to Ridwan (2015), the government must create an IT regulatory framework similar to those found in industrialised nations like the USA, UK, and Canada. These governments have IT regulatory frameworks that help with the implementation of e-government and digital services in the public sector. In Nigeria, the situation is the opposite. Government policy for the implementation of ICT laws to help the country create its ICT framework is nonexistent.

Corruption

According to Abah & Nwoku (2019), e-governance in Nigeria, like in all developing nations, is not immune to the threat of corruption. Due to widespread corruption in the public sector, the majority of e-governance projects and programmes have hit the roadblocks during implementation. The forces behind the nasty monster within government circles do everything in their power to thwart the process, as it has been proven or established that e-governance has the magic wand to decrease corruption to the bare minimum. They undoubtedly want the status quo to continue in order to allow for continued resource exploitation of the nation.

The Nexus of E-governance and Public Service Delivery

Kumar, Mukerji, Butt, & Persaud (2007) in Ridwan (2015) agreed that despite the challenges associated with e-governance implementation, there are also benefits of e-governance implementation. It allows people more discretion over how often and how they interact with government. Citizens have the option to access these services at the time and location of their choice rather than visiting a department at a specific location or calling government representatives at a specific time designated by the government. Additionally, access to government services is growing. People can save a significant amount of time and money thanks to the electronic delivery of government services, particularly the accessibility of various forms and the possibility of online filing them. Today's technology allows for the personalization of websites to the point that the provision of services might be customized to fit each individual's unique demands, hence raising citizen satisfaction with government services. For developing nations, the

adoption and use of online government services is particularly important. Therefore, the delivery of government services online has the potential to greatly improve accessibility and provide citizens in developing nations with significant time and money savings. The web channel's transparency feature may also help to reduce corruption, which is a significant issue in many developing nations. Therefore, e-governance might essentially revolutionize how government services are delivered. Governments can drastically lower transaction costs and enhance internal planning processes by implementing e-governance services. Governments typically need to streamline their administrative procedures in order to implement e-governance and integrate services. The cost of government services is reduced through streamlining because it increases efficiency, lowers costs, and creates savings. In some circumstances, earned revenue can be reinvested into more advanced e-governance services and apps, or it can be utilized to lower or eliminate service prices. Activities necessary for e-governance provide decrease corruption, boost administrations' transparency and trustworthiness, and facilitate greater citizen participation in government. By allowing citizens to take part in political consultations in real-time and at a low cost, e-governance can aid in democratization (e-Democracy).

Discussion

Nigeria will increase public access to government services, information, dependable security, proper oversight responsibilities, accountability, and laws if it is honest about implementing e-governance. With it, simple citizen identification, electronic voting, judicial proceedings, law enforcement, licencing, taxation, mobilisation, education, service delivery, feedback, intelligence gathering, and the analysis of public financial records are all included. To establish a meaningful data-driven decision-making system at a low cost and with fewer human interactions, which typically encourage corruption and bribery, governments around the world are taking steps to integrate technology into all governmental activities (Olubiyi, 2022).

In terms of offering e-governance services to its inhabitants, Nigeria, with its rapidly expanding ICT industry in Africa, particularly in financial technology (FinTech), nevertheless ranks poorly. Therefore, all that is required for the Nigerian government to do is adopt digital innovation and follow suit with other nations where technology significantly aids e-governance. To maintain data, deliver services, and interact with their inhabitants, many nations and government organisations around the world are relying more and more on electronic techniques and technology. Nigeria shouldn't be a special case.

It is obvious that for the nation to attain the required growth and stability, digital applications in national planning are essential and unavoidable, because the likelihood of overstressing the current infrastructure increases in the absence of a trustworthy data-driven decision-making system and sufficient scientific estimates. In order to increase public access to government services, e-governance and the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in government operations are required. If e-governance is fully implemented, it can assist with tax administration as well as areas like security, defence, judicial, economic surveillance, and social and national planning in relation to demography.

It is crucial to underline that without trustworthy citizen data and a national database gateway, no relevant government can enhance the lives and livelihoods of its residents. The government must therefore be able to know and be able to identify not only its residents but also all other persons living inside its borders in order to be able to govern with any degree of real influence.

Therefore, there is no question that e-governance adoption is essential and necessary for the advancement of the country. More specifically, e-governance can reduce crime and instability in the nation by streamlining government operations and by giving the government access to more intelligence and information. When adopted, e-governance will also aid in the enhancement of social interventions aimed at reducing inequality, fixing social ills, and meaningfully determining the country's unemployment rate, among other things.

Conclusion

E-governance and digital service through ICT is the driving engine of the 21st Century service delivery by the public service. Although developing countries like Nigeria are still very far away from reaping the benefits of e-governance.

Nigeria and other developing nations must act fast now, having had a bitter experience during the Covid-19, where public service delivery came to a halt as a result of the lockdown and social distancing. We must not wait to experience another Covid-19 or any other pandemic before migrating our public service delivery model to digital service via e-governance implementation, the truth is that we might not be that lucky again. Although the government through the Head of Service of the Federation has recently made a policy statement on the total need and support for digital services, but much is yet to be seen on implementation.

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