Contextual Challenges of Planning and Implementing E-Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract: Unprecedentedly the world moved towards a new era called the Information Age. This was occasioned by the upsurge in the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in virtually all facets of human endeavor. Governments over have keyed into this initiative, with a view to inject efficiency and effective in the day to day business of administration. This gave rise to the use of such prefix as "e", which implies "electronic", to complement governance in governmental organizations that have adopted its use. In its numerous bids to effectively carry out its statutory function of provision of public goods and services, the Nigerian government has undertaken a myriad of reforms aimed at repositioning the public sector. In amongst others, some of the notable reforms carried out in recent times include liberalization, deregulation, downsizing, right sizing, commercialization, monetization, privatization, etc. These reforms are carried out with a view to blurring the line of differences between the public and private sectors, thereby making public service delivery look more business–like. Notwithstanding, public service delivery and accountability remain particularly erratic and ineffective in Nigeria. Resultantly, the United Nation's 2030 agenda identifies the latent advantage of adopting ICT driven and enabled policies in government in the delivery of basic social services for the people in five key sectors, namely; Education, Health, Labour and Employment, Finance and Social Welfare (UNDESA, 2016). Accordingly, countries that have adopted ICT have thought and proved to have transformed and modernized the civil service administration. In lieu, the primacy of this study therefore is to interrogate the contextual challenges of planning and implementing e-governance in Nigeria. Preceding the introductory prologue, the resorts to analytical framework, the proceeds to examine the contextual underpinnings of e-governance in Nigeria before discussing relevant findings as it also attempts to proffer viable alternatives.

Analytical Framework

The idea of e-government falls largely under the umbrella of New Public Management (henceforth NPM). NPM encompasses a series of approach to public series of approach that emerged from a handful of Western countries in the 1980's. The NPM model arose in response to the precincts of the old public administration in adjusting to the requirements of a competitive market economy.

The NPM model advocates the requisition of private sector innovations, resources, structures and ideas to better the public sector (Yakubu, 2018). Furthermore the theoretical foundations of NPM abound in public choice and principal agent theory, which claim that individual self-interest drive bureaucratic behaviour. Competition, entrustment, performance and responsiveness offer yardsticks to standardize bureaucratic behaviour and generate improved outcomes. NPM approaches were also adopted by a number of non-OECD countries, often as part of public sector reform programmes proffered by international aid donor agencies, with uneven implications (Pollit, 1993). Relatedly, James (2002) posits the second strand of the NPM literature is grounded in the transformative prospects of digital governance.

While the NPM model remains auspicious, it fails to deal with the defiance of the classical public administration beyond the proffering the replicating private sector driven innovations. This is somewhat problematic, more so in the developing world where the private sector is still relatively growing. Another major challenge of applying the theory is this part of the globe is that of capacity and technical know-how. Of the numerous critics of the NPM Hughes (2004) regards the model as simply a duplication of private sector resourcefulness in the public ones, with little resort to disparate goals of both sectors. Formidably, Ojeifo and Alegbeleye (2015, p. 59) claim assertions affirming that role of NPM in altering the fortunes of emerging societies is no news. However, in Nigeria it seems we have not yet embrace in totality this new concept.

While the e-governance initiative can be located within the auspices of the NPM and has proven to be effective in the West the same cannot be said for Nigeria. Although there abounds a growing trend in info-culture in Africa's most populous democracy, the formidable force of conventional administrative and bureaucratic models remains one of the major defining attributes of the Nigerian public service.

Evaluating Nigeria's Preparedness for E-Governance

A revolutionary shift in paradigm from the practice traditional public administration and bureaucracy to the NPM models mandates that certain factors are taken into cognizance so as to allow for the attainment of predetermined objectives. Accordingly, this section sets out to examine Nigeria's preparedness for to adopt and implement e-governance oriented policies. In other words it will examine the e-readiness of Nigeria by examining its capacity in terms of ICT infrastructure, institutional flexibility and openness to innovation, social barriers and the overall digital culture. Hence, the concept of e-readiness has been defined by Delloite Research (2000) as ability to use information and communication technologies (ICT) to develop one's economy and to foster one's welfare. Furthermore, the United Nations (2004) as a measure of the quality of a country's ICT infrastructure and the ability of its consumers, businesses and governments to use ICT to their benefit. In general, there are several benchmarking indices at the global level those calculated by the United Nation amongst other international bodies. Resultantly, the aforementioned factors of ICT infrastructure, institutional flexibility and openness to innovation, social barriers and the overall digital culture will be adopted to parochially ascertain Nigeria's e-readiness.

ICT Infrastructure

Lack or weakness of ICT infrastructure is one of the major challenges for e-government implementation. Internetworking is required to enable appropriate sharing of information and open up new channels for communication and delivery of new services (Ndou, 2004). For a transition to electronic government, architecture, that is, a guiding set of principles, models and standards, is needed. Many developing countries suffer from the digital divide (digital

divide refers to the gap in opportunity between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not, and they are not able to deploy the appropriate ICT infrastructure for e-government deployment (OECD, 2003).

Although Nigeria is basking in the euphoria of digital acceptance and usage in different spheres of the society, the state remains in want of e-infrastructure that will spearhead a digital revolution in Nigeria. Furthermore, ICT infrastructure like any other do not just spring up they require concentrated political commitment to establish and implement them. In abstract terms this form of commitment entails the readiness of the ruling political class to invest reasonable amount of political will as well as much needed resources to the development of ICT infrastructure. In the United Nations E-government Index Survey of 2018 Nigeria ranked 143 out of a total of 193 countries in overall ranking, and 117 of 193 in terms of e-participation ranking (Nations, 2018). The aforementioned figures points the level of government commitment to building and ICT infrastructure and the willingness of the society to subscribe to such platforms.

Institutional Flexibility

The concept of institutional flexibility refers to the preparedness of state institutions to fast track and initiates innovations in line with global standard practices. According to Feng (2003) the implementation of e-government is not a pure technical issue only, but rather an organizational issue. Organizational challenges include: Top management support, Resistance to change to electronic ways, Collaboration and Lack of qualified personnel and training.

On the subject matter of top management support, the Nigerian communication minister claims "by 2020 and beyond, Nigerian public officials must at the click of the computer buttons, be able to deliver the concrete dividends of democracy to millions. Further claiming that by click of button government should be able to collate millions of ideas from Nigerians as prompt and invaluable input in policy evolution and development" (RealNews, 2015). This in itself sounds more or less like a campaign speech, only different been it was delivered at a public symposium not a rally. The comments of the minister is in sharp deviance for existential realities and the UN E-government index as the e-preparedness of Nigeria can be rated low with regards to institutional flexibility. More so, public officials tend to be skeptical about major institutional transformation as it may cost them certain legal and illicit incentives.

Social Barriers

Social issues are mainly concerned with the usability by a large variety of people. This implies that the interface must be usable by all kinds of people within the government. Social obstacles include many factors such as digital divide, culture, education and income. Within the confines of this study, social barriers further refer to the existential social realities in Nigeria that affects the probability of transiting or at least a largely e-government oriented policy society. Of such numerous challenges classical bureaucratic culture possess a great threat to the attainment of e-government.

In the sense that public officials are afraid of losing their grip and influence on power and fear that technologies if allowed will put them out of work. Also because a better of the public sector have failed to acknowledge the revolution brought about by ICT they feel intimidate by it and as such do all in their capacity to block it. With regards to cultural barrier however, particularly amongst the populace they are growing calls for making government services internet based.

Digital Divide

The digital divide refers to the gap in opportunity between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not. Those who do not have access to the Internet will be unable to benefit from e- government services. Thus, digital divide is underpins the idea of a gap between those who have access to computers and the internet and those without. Therefore not all people have the suitable access to computers and Internet, whether due to a lack of income, necessary skills, or internet access amongst numerous other contextual challenges as there maybe. In Nigeria for instance a lot of people who live in cities or have some formal education and relative levels of income have access to internet enabled smart phones, this however does not translate to them been able to access government services on the internet. Accordingly, it is the view of this study that are better part of the population that actually access government services online are those with mid or high income status, this is thought to be so because the most effective government online services largely encompass revenue mobilization portals. Hence, e-governance in Nigeria aids for the easy generation of revenue by the state but has been found wanting in providing other services.

Way Forward

In lieu of the foregoing, it is the view of this study that e-government in Nigeria as in a better of the developing world remains in the initiation stage, as such comparison with that obtained in the advanced West will be bias. However, while recognizing the infant nature of the initiative in Nigeria, the government has not made concentrated efforts at taking e-government beyond a revenue mobilization platform. While the implementation of e-government is not an easy endeavor, there is need for utmost political commitment and societal pressure should the initiative bring about certain predetermined outcomes.

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