INTERROGATING THE CITIZEN-CENTERED SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA'S AGRICULTURAL SECTOR THROUGH E-GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

The provision of citizen-centered services and development are critical indices in the measurement of performance of every government. In this era of Information Communication Technology (ICT), government businesses can be conducted through the electronic governance (EGOV) platform. E-governance involves the development, deployment and enforcement of the policies, laws and regulations necessary to support the functioning of a knowledge society as well as

the transformation of internal and external public sector relationship through ICT in order to optimize government service delivery and citizen participations. Nigeria is being threatened by internal insecurity because of preponderance of its citizens who engage in vices like thuggery, insurgency, kidnapping, robbery, drug addiction due to lack of access to government services such as information, capital to start and grow businesses, amongst other essential needs for development. Also, corruption at the forefront of government hinders the transfer of funds from government to the citizen. Based on this premise, the Nigerian Ministry of Agriculture in 2012 adopted the use of ICT through the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme in releasing funds to local famers thereby cutting unnecessary bureaucracy and corruption that hindered the growth of the Agriculture sector in Nigeria. This study utilizes secondary data for the method of analyses by reviewing extant literature on the e-wallet scheme implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture in Nigeria, and in addition analyzed the extent to which the E-wallet scheme delivered citizen-centered services for national development in Nigeria. The findings show that e-governance enhanced the delivery of citizen-centered services and national development. Based on these findings, non-participatory government ministries are advised to take advantage of citizen-centered EGOV platforms to empower the nation.

Keywords:

E-governance, Agricultural sector, E-wallet, Citizen-Centred Services, ICT,

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1.0 Introduction

The quintessence of E-governance is to cultivate excellent government services and distribution systems that are efficient and effective, and engage citizenry and government in a user-centred approach (Bertot, Jaeger and McClure, 2008). User centred E-Governance proposes that government will provide services and resources tailored to the actual service and resource needs of its stakeholders; citizens, residents, government employees and businesses operating in the country, thereby leading to augmented translucence, involvement and a more approachable government

(Misuraca, 2007). On the government side of the E-governance equation, efficient and effective e-governance would result in a gain of economies of scale, reduced costs, and the provision of technology-enabled user services, which will in the Nigerian factor, cut layers of unnecessary bureaucracy that will in most times aid corruption (Fatile, 2012).

The agriculture sector in Nigeria has since the growth of the oil and gas industry in the 1960s, experienced a weakening. From its position as a blooming commercial industry, the sector has deteriorated to a purely subsistence industry, thereby invariably increasing the rate of import of agriculture produce into the country, which has had a negative toll on the Nigerian economy (KPMG quarterly report, 2014). In a bid to rebuild the sector, the Nigerian government introduced an allowance in its yearly budget to help boost agro businesses in the country. However for many years, farmers in Nigeria were embittered of their access to these funds. It is believed that due to the lack of efficient transfer methodology, bureaucracy and lack of transparency, government officials especially in the local government embezzle the funds (Onwudinjo, 2012). Following this, the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme (GESS) was introduced to offer farmers in Nigeria the opportunity to receive direct funding and assistance from the government through the use of electronic wallet.

This study examines to what extent the GESS implemented by the ministry of Agriculture and Rural development have helped reduce bureaucracy and engage citizens in a user-centred manner, thereby availing these farmers with the necessary resources needed to grow their businesses, which customarily leads to a developed agro-business sector in the Nigerian economy.

The case of the e-wallet initiative of the ministry of Agriculture in Nigeria, offers an insight into the application of e-governance in a less developed country; a case other countries are beginning to emulate.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Conceptualizing e-governance

The growing need to improve the quality of public service delivery, through new mechanism and forms, such as public-private partnerships, externalisation, and delegation, with an attention to the market, the "citizen-user-customer" and the need

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to manage efficiently and effectively limited resources, in a time of rapid technological change has created an enormous need for e-governance (Misuraca, 2007). In this context, e-governance is playing an important role in promoting the transformation of the state through a complex system of relationships that need to be managed and governed. E-governance is more a process about the "how" than the "what". It is a thoughtful movement whereby the way difficulties are tackled is as imperative as the result gotten (Misuraca, 2007).

E-governance as expressed by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2007) is the public sector's application of ICT with the purpose of improving information and service distribution, emboldening citizen participation in the policymaking process and ensuring government's accountability, transparency and effectiveness. The Pacific Institute of Management in India, defines e-governance as the application of ICTs to the process of government functioning to bensure Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent governance (SMART governance). Similarly, the African Training and Research Centre in Administration for Development (CAFRAD) defined E-governance as the use of ICTs in the co-ordinating, planning, formulating and implementing of decisions and operations related to governance problems (CAFRAD, 2002). Citizen centred e-governance approach is capable of closing the gap between government service providers and users, thus eliminating corruption which would usually hinder the efficient flow of a nation's resources to its citizens (United Nations, 2007). E-governance is thus key in promotion of good governance, which is key in the sustainable development of a nation (Misuraca, 2007).

Ciborra and Navarra (2005), analysed four main objectives of e-governance as follows:

1. To restructure administrative functions and processes
2. To overcome barriers to coordinate and cooperate within the public administration
3. To monitor government performance, and
4. To improve the relationship between government and the citizens.

Elaborately, Finger (2003, 2004) and Finger, Rossel and Misuraca (2005, 2006) conceptualized e-governance into three themes:

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1**. E-governance as customer satisfaction:** Going beyond performing government purposes via ICT tools but satiating the citizen/customer through the conveyance of services via same tools (Finger, 2003, 2004; Finger, Rossel and Misuraca, 2005, 2006, Misuraca, 2007)

2. **E-governance as processes and interactions:** E-governance as a decisional process, the process through which institutions, organizations, companies and societies guide themselves, and

3. **E-governance as tools:** A set of tools in the hands of the government: usually viewed as the possibilities E-governance can offer such as new better managed relationship between the citizens and the state, and the elimination of corruption in delivering services. The value of this tool is measured by its application to specific goals and objectives (Cathia, 2003, Finger, 2003, 2004; Finger, Rossel and Misuraca, 2005, 2006).

It is important to note that e-governance requires that all partners linked in the "network" show participation and efficiency; thereby creating a closer alliance between government and the citizens (CAFRAD, 2002).

2.2 Governance in e-governance:

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 1997) defines governance as the exercise of economic, political and administrative influence to govern a country's concerns at all levels. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003) further delineates governance as the exercise of political, economic and administrative influence in the governing of a country's concerns, including citizen's enunciation of their interests and exercise of their legal rights and obligations

The World Bank (1997) further identifies three distinct aspects of governance:

1. Governance as the form of political regime.
2. Governance as the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for maturity, and
3. Governance as the capacity of governments to design, formulate and implement policies and discharge functions.

More relatable, governance is understood as a broad process affecting the way decisions are taken and responsibility allocated among social and economic agents

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within the realms of politics, state administration, and bureaucracy. In less developed countries, governance is measured by the capability of the government to effectively transition its state to development (Misuraca, 2007). According to World Bank (1997a), governance is measured based on the government's capability to promote democracy, reduce corruption, increase transparency, expand human capabilities, and improved ability to carry out governmental policies and functions.

Common arguments in the line of governance as a sub in e-governance, is that ICTs are essential to increase transparency and accountability in the governance process, thereby reducing costs in service delivery and enhancing participation of citizens, businesses and civil society in the workings of governments through the use of ICT tools (Ciborra and Navarra, 2005).

2.2 E in e-Governance

Finger, Misuraca and Rossel (2007) viewed E-governance as the expression of a "dynamic tension" between institutional frameworks and ICTs, with emphasis on governance "with and of" where "with" means "bureautic", web-based and connective type of technologies and applications or rather said mediation-supportive technologies and applications; while governance "of" ICTs refers to dealing in the form of innovation and regulation with all the technologies of the Information society. Following the definition by UNESCO (2007), there is no e-governance without "e", which refers to the public sector's use of ICT in information and service distribution. This is facilitated through the use of ICT tools, such as government websites, emails, mobile phones, instant messaging, presence information, video conferencing, and data sharing (Motilewa, et al., 2015). The World Bank defines ICTs as a generic term, which includes IT; software and hardware inclusive, and the telecommunication infrastructure, equipment and services (World Bank, 1997). What is important about ICTs is their capacity for improving the communication between people: that is defined as the quintessential aspect of human society.

Empirical evidence and studies of the inherent characteristics of Information and Communication Technologies have shown ICTs as important tools for development. This is achievable through their exceptional ability to increase the effectiveness and reach of development inventions, enhance good governance and lower costs of service delivery both in the micro and national levels (Sarbuland, 2003). Thus it is

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important to note that ICTs will only expedite economic maturity through its
amalgamation into overall national development strategies. It also serves as a
platform for easier communication between the various stakeholders needed for
development to take place (Misuaraca, 2007).

2.3 Good governance through e-governance, and sustainable development:

Sustainable development is defined by the International Institute of Sustainable
development (1995) as the improvement of economic efficiency, protection and
restoration of the environment and enhancement of the wellbeing of people. Statistical
evidence shows that countries are able to create and attain sustainable development
through good governance on the path of the government. Where governance is as
defined by UNDP (1997) as the apportionment and management of resources to retort
to communal challenges, and good governance as the transparent apportionment and
management of resources to ensure effective involvement. As put by OECD (2001),
good governance is characterized by

1. **Participation**: either direct or through legitimate intermediate institutions or
   representatives

2. **Consensus orientation:** Involvement of the different interest in society, to
   reach a broad consensus on the best interest of every member

3. **Accountability:** Responsibility of clarity from governmental institutions to
   the private sector and civil society and vice versa.

4. **Transparency**: Free flow, without distortion of information across all those
   who are affected by decisions taken and enforced in the society through easily
   understandable forms and media

5. **Responsiveness**: Institutions and processes that try to serve all stakeholders
   within a reasonable timeframe

6. **Effectiveness and Efficiency**: Outcomes produced as a result of good
   governance should meet the needs of the society whilst making maximum use
   of available resources

7. **Equity and inclusiveness**: Fairness among all members of the society

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8. **Rule of law**: Good governance requires fair legal framework that are enforced impartially and measureable (Misuraca, 2007)

Simply put, the role of governance in promoting sustainable development comprises of efficient government, effective civil society and a successful private sector (Misuraca, 2007)

2.4 Exploitation of e-governance

Despite the many benefits of e-governance, recent studies have found vast differences between countries in the maturity of their e-governance efforts. It is acknowledged that e-governance is still yet to be tapped in most countries even in developed countries, where statistics show that the most mature countries have tapped less than 20% of e-governance potential (World Bank, 2002). Furthermore, the results of the UN Global e-government Survey in 2003 assert that "only very few governments have chosen to use e-governance functions for transactional services or networking; and even fewer governments use it to encourage the genuine involvement of citizens in policymaking. Those who do, would usually, employ it at a very elementary level (Misuraca, 2007).

3.0 Methodology

The work carried out a qualitative research in examining the extent to which the application of ICT in governance can foster the delivery of citizen-centered services. Through a case study methodology, the study reviewed existing literature on the e-wallet scheme implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture in Nigeria, and analysed the extent to which the E-wallet scheme, which offers farmers the opportunity to receive direct funding and assistance from the government through their mobile phones, have helped reduce bureaucracy and engage citizens in a user-centred manner, thereby availing these farmers with the necessary resources needed to grow their businesses, which invariably leads to a developed agro-business sector in the Nigerian economy.

3.1 E-wallet system of the ministry of Agriculture in Nigeria

The agriculture industry in Nigeria is a very wide industry covering forestry, hunting, fishing, crop cultivation and livestock raring (Signal Alliance, 2012). It is estimated

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that Nigeria imports about N635 billion value of wheat, N356 billion value of rice, N217 billion value of sugar amongst other imported goods. These imported goods, which a very high percentage of Nigerians live on, are more expensive and economically tasking on Nigerians and the nation's economy, as it reduces possible employment opportunities in the agriculture sector and diminishes the value of Nigeria's foreign exchange (Ajayi, 2003). Some notable reasons for the deteriorating agriculture industry in Nigeria are: bad governance, unrealistic goals and self-indulgence, infrastructure deficit, lack of skilled labour pool, limited access to financing and inability to manage large scale operations (Signal alliance, 2012). Yet, agriculture contributes 40% of Nigeria's GDP, and is predominantly practised in the rural areas of the country.

In July 2012, the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme (GESS) a product of the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) of the Federal Government was initiated as a response to the dilemma of the Agriculture sector in Nigeria since the discovery of oil. The scheme is powered by the electronic wallet (e-wallet), an electronic distribution channel that provides an efficient and transparent system for the purchase and distribution of agriculture inputs based on a voucher system. The broad objective of the scheme is to advance efficiency, achieve food security at the macro level and increase household income for the farmers at the micro level, thereby encouraging the sector's stakeholders especially in the fertilizer and seed value chain to work collectively to achieve the objective of the scheme by providing direct subsidy through the supply of discounted fertilizers and seeds.

In the past years, fertilizer and seeds procurement and distribution in the country was highly disputed by fraud, discrepancies, lack of accountability and inefficiencies. Although resources (money) were released both at the federal and state levels for farm inputs, these inputs were however short of reaching the intended beneficiaries (small scale farmers), thus the expected results of the scheme could not be visualised. Also, the role of the federal government in the direct procurement and distribution of the fertilizers weakened the ability of private companies to contribute in the sector and contend efficiently for market share. As part of the scheme, mobile phones were provided for the farmers, linking them directly to the government and vice versa (FEPSAN, 2012).

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Major Challenges of the E-wallet scheme in Nigeria

1. **Sub-standard education:** Agriculture activities are mostly carried out in the rural areas, where a large proportion of the farmers have no prior educational background; it thus became difficult to communicate effectively the e-wallet process to these farmers.

2. **Lack of ICT skills:** Among those who received the e-wallets, a large proportion did not know how to activate their numbers, or the numbers to dial for fertilizer and seeds. Most of the farmers acknowledged that it was the first time they were operating a phone.

3. **Poor telecommunication services**: Many farmers did not receive the e-wallets and had to resort to the use of scratch cards, and a large proportion of those who received are located in very rural areas where there are little or no telecommunication services.

4. **Inflexibility of the scheme:** The scheme adopted a one-size-fit-all approach into the provision of fertilizers and seeds. It is imperative to note that different farmers have different needs. In a survey carried out by GES, some farmers complained that the types of fertilizer supplied were not appropriate for their soil types.

Generally, farmers are mostly happy with the scheme. It was observed that they found it easier to purchase fertilizer from appointed dealers than was previously possible.

Strategies for citizen-centered e-Governance:

Following the structure followed by the Ministry of Agriculture in implementing the E-wallet scheme, the following serve as strategies, which can be followed by other ministries and government organizations to successfully establish a citizen-centred government platform, government needs to follow a set out guideline:

1. **Comprehensive plan for Citizen-centered E-government Services:** In designing e-governance platform, it is essential that essential strategies in the

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development, implementation and evaluation of the service are highlighted: the goal of the service must be identified, the aim, target audience, timeframes, information needs of users of the platform, specific citizen-centered strategies that will be absorbed in the design and operation of the E-governance platform (Bertot et al., 2008).

2. **Engage Citizens**: It is a common African saying that "only the wearer of the shoe knows where the shoe pinches". To engage users successfully, government must conduct information and service needs assessment, which will determine the user needs and ability of citizens to engage in E-governance services.

3. **Understand available ICT tools and expertise**: Government must ensure the essential infrastructures needed to successfully participate in e-governance are available to its citizens. It will be unwise for government to engage in e-governance if there is a lack of access to ICT and ICT tools in the area, or the introduction of a high technology e-governance platform for farmers in the rural areas (Bertot et al., 2008) It is observed that in the case study of the Nigerian farmers for example, the wide spread of basic mobile phones throughout even rural areas makes it conceivable for rural farmers to gain access to the simple device to participate in the e-wallet platform made available by the ministry of agriculture.

It is essential that government continuously assess its e-governance environmental evaluation and services to review their readiness against technological progress and ongoing changes in the governance system for continual improvement. This is very essential in Nigeria, where the maintenance culture is statistically proven to be low. Also, the services provided online should be available to all citizens, such that users with disability are well catered for. Failure to ensure that the above mentioned three points are followed will possibly result in the incapability of citizens to make full use of developed e-governance services and resources.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The benefits of efficient and effective e-governance includes the provision of technology-enabled services to the citizens, capacity to create employment, improve education and health systems, delivery of aids such as achieving economies of scale

and reduction of cost to the government, reduced operation costs, better competence to focus services, increased coverage and quality of service delivery and enhanced response capacity to address issues of poverty, increased national and international competitive needs of businesses, increased transparency and answerability, thus largely diminishing the risk of corruption and increasing the perception of good governance among citizens as seen in the Nigerian experience.

It is however important to note that the transformation of governance from non-ICT based to ICT based will also invoke both material and non-material costs; the most important of which is the need for dedicated, knowledgeable and engaged leadership i.e. leaders must be committed to critically think through the issues on board and steer the right course, otherwise e-governance becomes a wishful claim useful only for political purpose.

Despite the benefits of e-governance to the government of Nigeria and the citizens, it is imperative to note that the system of e-governance is a learning process, as such must be concerned with measurement, evaluation and also foresight. Thus it is essential that in inaugurating an e-governance platform, government is continuously communicating with the various stakeholders in other to integrate standards, variety, ingenuousness and multi-level diversity thereby leading to an efficient and effective e-governance platform. Although e-governance through the adoption of the e-wallet system in the Agriculture sector has proven to be effective, in curbing corruption and bureaucracy and providing citizens with much needed services, which is leading to the growth and sustainability of the Agriculture sector.

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