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E-Governance and E-Government: Rethinking Public Governance in Nigeria, within the Context of COVID-19

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Abstract

There are increasing numbers of countries across the African continent that have adopted e-government projects. Besides, these efforts have been driven by developed countries like the United States of America, Britain, China, France, Germany among others. However, despite the benefits accrue from the e-government project such as expansion in mobile telephony in a country like Nigeria, Nigeria's lack of infrastructure and functional literacy have impeded the growth of e-government. This study seeks to assess the efficacies of using e-governance in the contemporary era of covid-19 in Nigeria. This study argues that e-governance remains critical to the effective delivery of the Nigerian government owing to the dangers posed by the covid-19 pandemic especially as the government has considered social distancing as one of the options of curtailing the spread of coronavirus. Thus, the use of ICT by the government to access the large population of Nigerian within the shortest possible time when compared to the use of paper works. Thus, this study argues that if the Nigerian government would want to make significant progress in a bid to achieve the social distancing, it must channel it all its resources towards digitizing its operations with the citizens in line with global best practices.

Keywords: E-Governance, E-Government, e-learning, e-health, ICT, Nigeria

Introduction

In recent time across the world, citizens of various countries are becoming more conscious of their rights especially as it has to do with their desire to get involved in the decision-making process of their respective countries. This has necessitated the desire of government at every level of governance quest to recognize the need to provide the necessities of life to the citizens through e-governance which is considered as one of the modern mechanisms for the efficient and effective administration of social and economic services.

E-Government has already arrived in most African countries, and the number of e-government projects is growing apace, albeit driven significantly by external stakeholders and an external agenda. The key challenge for the e-government development of Africa remains the widespread lack of infrastructure and functional literacy. Despite recent expansion in mobile telephony, most countries in Africa remain at the tail end of the digital divide.

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Today, significant numbers of countries are beginning to reap from the benefits accrue from e-governance and other ICT initiatives in terms of increase in accessibility to large numbers of people at the same time within a short possible time. Other benefits accrue from the use of e-governance include cost reduction, reduction in corruption and increasing access to vulnerable groups especially people with disabilities.

Besides, the e-governance has three key areas of e-governance include: E-administration is geared towards improving government processes; E-services which is a concern with connecting the citizens with their government and E-society which is targeted at building interactions with and within civil society. Moreover, the use of e-governance in payment of salaries and providing a platform for database especially in a country like Nigeria where the tax system and some examination bodies have been digitalized has enhanced Nigerians access to information and services because these have provided economic and social development opportunities, as well as promote political participation and engage in the decision-making processes.

However, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic almost every country of the world has resulted in e-governance in engaging its citizens as well as engaging in other productive ventures. One country that turned digital in its interactions with the citizens is Nigeria, Today, the use of e-banking and other online platforms has become prominent among many Nigerians. By implication, the Covid-19 pandemic is a blessing in disguised that require concerted efforts by the government in meeting its desired goals for the citizens. It is against this backdrop; this study seeks to assess the efficacies of using e-governance in the contemporary era of covid-19 in Nigeria.

Conceptual Review
E-Governance and E-Government
E-governance has been variously defined by scholars in the literature. According to Coleman (2008), it involves digitized coding, processing, storage and distribution of data relating to three key aspects of governing societies mainly the representation of the citizens and regulation of citizens behaviour; the delivery of public services to the citizens; and the generation as well as circulation of official information between and among the citizens.

Backus, (2001) defined e-governance as "the application of *electronic means* in (1) the *interaction* between *government* and citizens and government and businesses, as well as (2) in internal *government operations* to simplify and improve democratic, government and business aspects of Governance". Backus, (2001) further elaborated the definition of e-governance by stating that "the term *interaction* stands for the delivery of government products and services, exchange of information, communication, transactions and system integration. *The government* consists of levels and branches. Government levels include central, national, regional, provincial, departmental and local government institutions. Examples of government branches are Administration, Civil Service, Parliament and Judiciary functions. *Government operations* are all back-office processes and inter-governmental interactions within the total government body". (Backus, 2001:5-6).

However, the concept of "E-government" consist of two words "E" which signifies Electronic". E-government is a form of e-business in governance and refers to the processes and structures needed to deliver electronic services to the public (citizens and businesses), collaborate with business partners and to conduct electronic transactions within an organisational entity.

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E-government is the application information communication technologies like the Internet, and other mobile computing devises like handset in transferring information between and among citizens, businesses, and other organs of government. E-government is the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) by citizens, businesses and governments in their interactions or activities. Basu, (2004) posits that the major aim of e-government is to make government efficient in the management of information to the citizen and to provide the citizens with better service delivery. Moreover, e-government empowers citizens by ensuring that they have easy access to information and participate in decision-making.

E-government involves the use of Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing by governmental institutions in accessing information that will enable them to relate with citizens, businesses, and other organs of government. E-government serves several purposes such as better service delivery by the government to citizens, and empowering the citizens to access information, and for the government to perform their activities effectively. The short- and long-term benefits of E-Government is that it will among other things help in promoting transparency, accountability and reducing corruption (World Bank, 2011).

E-government involves using information technology, and especially the Internet, to improve the delivery of government services to citizens, businesses, and other government agencies (Basu, 2004).

Literature Review
There is a growing literature on the application of ICT in governance. These studies seek to examine the various dimensions and e-governance tools important to promote improve human activities and enhancing the socio-economic development of human society.

Today, there are increasing studies on e-governance in developing countries such as Arjan de Jager (2008);Backus,(2001); Basu,(2004); Onyancha (2010) and Onuigbo and Eme (2015)just to mention a few. Some of these studies address conceptual issues in e-governance such as Palvia and Sharma (2007) while some focus on the challenges of e-governance such as Onuigbo and Eme (2015)and Snellen (2005). Onuigbo and Eme (2015) investigated the roles, prospects and challenges of technology stimulated government to address the challenges inherent in the Nigerian administration system. They argued that the privatization of the Nigerian telecommunication and the emergence of social media has extended internet penetration in the country. However, there is a gap in the literature on the assessment of the efficacies of using e-governance in the contemporary era of covid-19 in Nigeria.

Efficacies of E-Governance and E-Government in the Contemporary era of Covid-19 in Nigeria
E-governance has assisted the Nigerian government in the contemporary era of Covid-19 in some ways such as meeting the urgency required by the government in its efforts at developing and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government service delivery. E-governance enables the citizens to transfer information freely without any physical barriers or hindrances. It also enables the citizens, business partners and employees to have easy access to service delivery. The major objectives of e-governance include: Build services with citizen choices in mind; Increase government accessibility; Foster social inclusion; responsibly disseminate information, and use taxpayers' resources effectively and efficiently (Holzer and Schwester, 2011). According to Ojo the objective of e-governance include the following: To ensure transparency in the workings of government; To ensure greater efficiency, objectivity, accountability and speed in providing services and information

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to the public; To provide qualitative and cost-effective services; To provide a single window for all government services; To evolve responsive administration; To provide a friendly, speedier and efficient interface; and To eliminate the middlemen (Maduabum, 2008:670).

Ajayi also identified the following objectives of e-government to include: To replace traditional governance with electronic governance; To create knowledge-based governance; To enhance Simple Moral Accountable Responsive and Transparent (SMART) governance; To reduce bureaucracy; To maximize productivity and quality; To eliminate waste; To increase efficiency; To create an easy and free access to government information, and To reduce the cost of service delivery (Maduabum 2008:670).

The significance of E-Governance in Nigeria has been brought to the fore by the Covid-19 pandemic. Long before now, the government efforts at digitalizing governance in Nigeria has been arguably slow. But the Covid-19 pandemic has brought social distancing as one of the methods of checkmating the spread of the coronavirus has made the government rethink of engaging its citizens using various ICT tools.

One of the efficacies of adopting e-governance is to promote the use of information and communication technologies in supporting health service and health-related service delivery. Today, the development of new technologies in health service delivery has helped hundreds of Nigerians to be tested for Covid-19. Thus, digitalizing Nigerian health sector especially in the contemporary time that the Covid-19 pandemic has put the health system of many countries under pressure.

Another area is in e-Learning which involves a ground-breaking move in education, through the provision of swift entrée to explicit information. E-learning proposals online coaching that can be delivered anytime and anywhere through a extensive variety of electronic learning resolutions such as the Internet, intranet/extranet, audio or videotape, satellite TV, CD-ROMWeb-based courseware, online discussion groups, live virtual classes, video and audio streaming, Web chat, online simulations, and virtual mentoring among others (Nagarajan and Jiji, 2010). Today, the federal government of Nigeria has requested all educational institutions to engage in e-learning. One of the advantages of adopting the e-Learning is to enable educational institutions in Nigeria to transcend distance and other institutional gaps by providing an interconnected virtual learning environment for the pupils and students alike.

In many developed countries across Europe and American have shown that commercial banks except in some few cases has to use their physical counter (Backus, 2001). In Nigeria, since the Federal Government of Nigeria directives to lockdown some states and to enforce the stay at home directives many commercial banks have been forced to go online in their activities while Nigerians, on the other hand, have been struggling especially those with a low level of education who lack access to the internet have been forced to learn online methods of transactions. Most transactions are carried out either an ATM, by mail or by the Internet, which has saved banks a significant amount of costs. Simply put, commercial banks in Nigeria do more work, with fewer people, in less time and with less and smaller offices, this is simply because they use the Internet. To this end, adoption of e-governance has been arguably slow in Nigeria but the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced a good number of organizations and institutions to be thinking digital.

On the whole, despite the benefits accrue from e-governance, Nigeria government at every level of governance have undertaken only a limited number of e-government projects across the country and

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the few executed have failed to achieve the desired goals. Also, the Nigerian government have limited e-government initiatives when compared to the developed countries like The Netherland, Russia, Sweden and Norway just to mention a few. Besides, Nigerians use limited ICTs in their work when compared to the developed countries like the United States, Britain, Germany and Canada. Also, a large population of Nigerians older generations of technology when compared to developed countries like the United States. It is pertinent to note that the major factors that trigger Nigerian limited access to ICTs that will promote e-governance has been attributed to financial constrain and lack of strategic "e-readiness for e-government" (Heeks, 2002).

Conclusion
The role of e-governance in the contemporary era of Covid-19 cannot be overemphasized. This is because it helps among other things in promoting efficient and effective service delivery. Therefore, this study is to assess the efficacies of using e-governance in the contemporary era of covid-19 in Nigeria. The goal of e-governance is enhancing access to government by citizens. It provides easy access to the Nigerians who work within government establishments and Nigerians who work with the government at all levels of governance. E-government in the contemporary era of Covid-19 is making a significant contribution in making public and private organizations more efficient and effective in-service delivery by enabling access to government services, it has the likelihood of enhancing the social and economic development in Nigeria. This study argues that when Nigerians have better access to information on available services, making payments online, doing e-transfer etc. all these can enhance productivity at both the private and public levels in the country especially now that the Nigerian government considers social distancing as one of the options in curtailing the spread of Covid-19. Therefore, achieving effective use of e□government has the capacity of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Nigerian private and public sector and providing linkages between government agencies.

Recommendations
Firstly, the federal government of Nigeria should invest huge state resources in the e-government project by digitalizing the entire governance process in the country. Secondly, the federal government of Nigeria should intensify more efforts in achieving greater e-readiness for e-government by investing more in education.

Thirdly, the Federal Ministry of Education should ensure that educational educations in Nigeria should put in place adequate mechanisms that will enable them to commence e-learning at all levels as present efforts are engaging the students and pupils via the virtual classes is rewarding as students and pupils alike are exposed to online learning. Moreover, the adoption of e-learning will allow students and pupils to attend lectures and classes that transcend distance within a shortest possible time.

Besides, the application of digitalization of the governance process in Nigeria will promote e-democracy, e-participation and e-voting in the country thereby reducing physical contact and achieving social distancing. Finally, e-health will enable faster access to health care service delivery, if the government invest more in acquiring modern technologies in health service delivery.

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