Public Libraries and E-Government in Nigeria
by
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Abstract

Developments in Information Communications Technologies (ICT) are a hallmark of the new Information Society They have provided the opportunity for governments to provide information and services online thereby promoting transparency and participatory democracy. Nigeria has keyed into this innovation to a reasonable extent. However the success of providing government services electronically has been linked to the availability of the points where the citizenry can access the Internet. The public library is on institution strategically placed in the community to serve as portals to access government services and information online. Public libraries in Nigeria are hampered from playing this role because of poor ICT infrastructure and lack of awareness amongst the citizenry of the roles of public libraries. The paper recommends that public libraries in the country should strategize on how best to provide e-government services. The Federal, State and Local governments should support public libraries so as to effectively provide e-government services emanating from their agencies.

Introduction

Government can be perceived as a public entity set up by citizens for the sole purpose of accomplishing the developmental goals of the people. These goals encompass the articulation of the people's development related proposals, needs and demands and providing solutions to them. The main purpose of government therefore becomes creating an enabling environment for the personal, economic and civic development of its citizens. The democratic system of government being practiced by the majority of the nations across the world allows for participation in governance. Access to government information becomes a prerequisite for a true democracy as it would keep the citizenry informed about government policies and activities (Koga, 2005). This is deemed essential as public assent of the actions of government gives it a measure of legitimacy. Thus, transparency and accountability to the general populace become an inbuilt part of governance.

In this information and technology driven age, governments all over the world have come to realize that information communication technologies will optimize service delivery, smoothen internal processes of its agencies and ensure greater participation of citizens in government. In an effort to become more efficient, accessible, save time and cost as well as promote transparency, government agencies all over the world are beginning to deliver services electronically. This is done primarily through use of information communication technologies. E-government is therefore the use of information and communication technology to boost access to, and delivery of government services online for the good of all. It strives to enhance management of resources through effective governance, increased transparency and the integration of government ministries, departments and agencies into online interaction for greater productivity (Muir & Oppenheim 2002; Akunyili, 2010).

E-government activities are interactions among the State, business community and the civil society conditioned and modified through the use of information communication technologies. The benefits of e-Government include:

a. saving costs in government and public operations and in other areas such as public procurement, tax collection and customs operations,

b. decrease in opportunities for corrupt practices through better accountability and transparency as all transactions could be easily monitored and physical contact between citizens and government officials are reduced,

c. empowerment of the populace for participation in political processes as they gain greater access to government information,

d. access to government information and services is available despite a person's physical location and

e. promotion of civic responsibility as the citizens interact with government agencies and officials.

In addition it helps government to transform its internal and external relationships. This enables the government to improve its services and interactions on different levels with its various stakeholders which include the citizenry, the business community, tourists and other government agencies (Yusuf, 2006). It also imbues a government with the capacity to participate in and benefit from the global digital economy. Well planned and executed e-government services allow the agencies of government to perform optimally and this increases the trust of citizens in government (Aicholzer,2004).
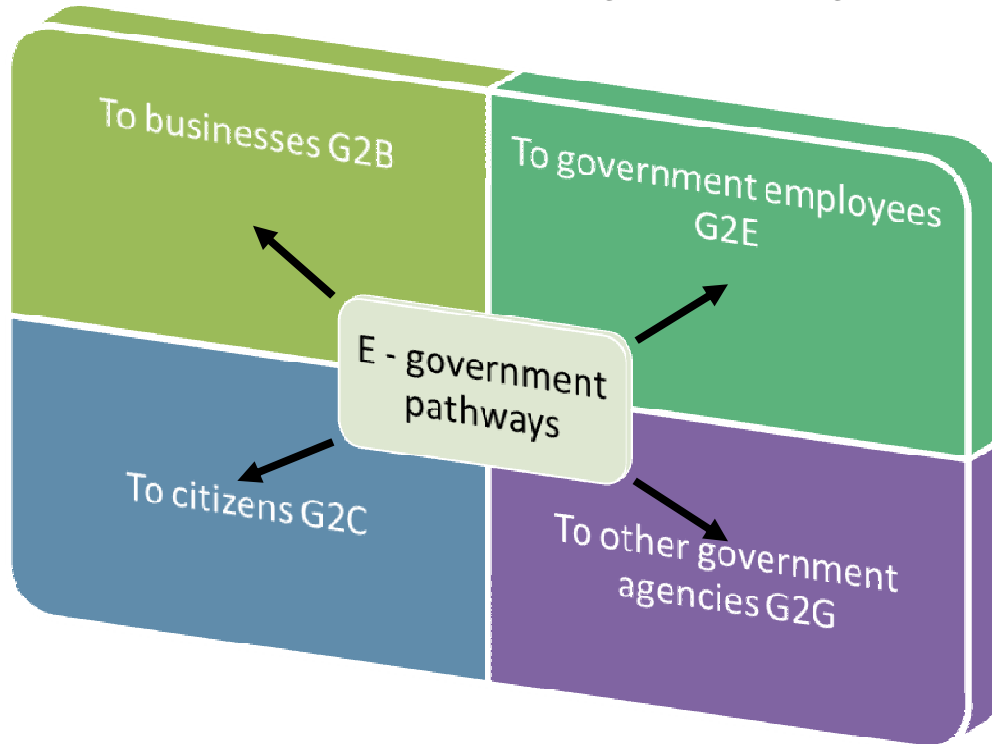
Tracks of E-Government Services

E-government may be applied by any arm of the government. The services can be delivered from government –to-business (G2B). This involves the relationship of government to the business community whereby forms pertaining to business transactions can be filled online and taxes, dues, fines
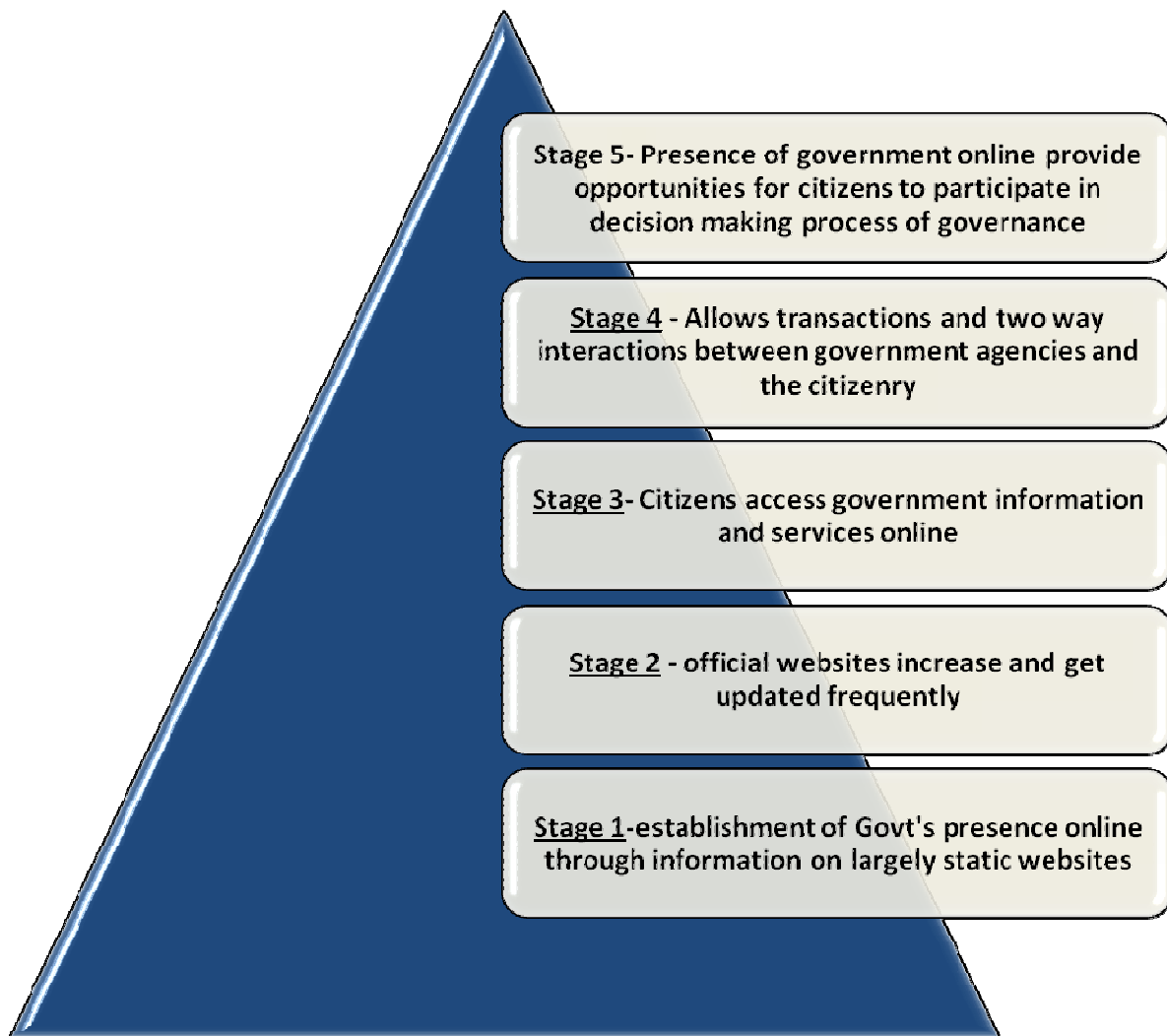
can be paid to the government electronically. This reduces corruption, ensures that the government gets all that is due to it and saves time. E-government services can also include electronic communications between Government and its employees (G2E), Government –to-citizen (G2C) and Government-to-Government (G2G). Figure 1 below details the various pathways through which the activities of e-government are performed.

Figure 1 – Tracks of e-government

Figure 2 – Phases of e-government implementation

Stage 5- Presence of government online provide opportunities for citizens to participate in decision making process of governance

Stage 4 - Allows transactions and two way interactions between government agencies and the citizenry

Stage 3- Citizens access government information and services online

Stage 2 - official websites increase and get updated frequently

Stage 1-establishment of Govt's presence online through information on largely static websites

Interactions on any of these levels may include placing information on the internet through websites, two-way communications between government and the business community or between government and citizens or even between government agencies (Adeyemo, 2011).

Phases of E-Government Services
Implementation of e-government activities normally goes through five phases. The first stage involves the establishment of the government's presence online through websites of its agencies which provide the citizenry with static information that is mainly political in nature. Government generates a vast amount of information which could be of benefit to individuals and businesses and as this information goes online users are able to search through the websites to get what they need. The websites are rarely updated despite any change in nomenclature or

activities of the agencies. At the second stage the number of official websites increase, the country's presence online becomes enhanced and the content of the websites gets to be updated frequently. However, the flow of information is basically from the government to the citizenry. A country enters the interactive or third stage of e-government when its presence online expands and citizens can access government institutions and services online. E-mail addresses are used to contact specific government officials and feedbacks from them could be obtained. The fourth stage is believed to become manifest when the presence of government and its agencies online allows transactions and two-way interactions between the agencies and the citizens. Transactions which might be financial (paying tax or a fine) or non-financial (submitting a tax return or checking for exam scores) are carried out online. The final stage of the implementation of e-government practices is

when the presence of government and its agencies online provide opportunities for the citizens to participate in the decision making process of government by allowing contributions from all online. It allows for dialogues between those in power and those being governed (UN, 2004). It is at this level that the concept of e-governance which encompasses e-government, e-regulation and e-democracy emerges (Mathias & Gaelle, 2003). See Figure 2 below for graphic details of the different stages of e-government implementation.

E-Government in Nigeria
The journey to e-government for Nigeria began with the emergence of democracy in 1999 and the launching of the National Policy on Telecommunications in the same year. In 2001 Nigeria was included in a consortium of countries comprising Tunisia, Mozambique and Albania under the leadership of Italy that will work with the UN Digital Opportunities Taskforce to draw up a template for developing countries that decide to provide government information and services electronically (Tallen,2002).

In the same year a National Policy on Information Technology was drawn up along with the establishment of the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) under the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology to anchor e-government strategies and make Nigeria an IT capable country in Africa using IT as the engine for sustainable development and global competitiveness (NITDA, 2010). NITDA according to Ajayi (2003) has undertaken the construction of the Public Service Network (PSNet) to provide internet access at a central location and distribute it using Broadband Wireless Access (BWA) technology to various sites around the country. This was to be done in collaboration with National e-Government Strategies Limited (NeGSt) which is a tripartite joint venture between the Federal Government (5%), consortium of banks (15%) and a strategic partner (80%)(Sesan, 2005). According to Ikhemuemhe (2004) the e-government initiative in Nigeria is meant to provide the citizenry with the means of interacting with Government, transacting business, advising, querying and even submitting tenders online without direct interface with government officials as well as developing online systems that will aid in creating public/private partnerships.

An online platform was created in 2004 by the country's Working Group on Globalization, Trade and Sustainable Development in partnership with the Heinrich Boll Foundation to provide information on globalization, World Trade Organization, NEPAD and African, Caribbean and Pacific States – European Union agreements on national development with a special focus on food security and sustainable development. The website also aims to facilitate dialogue between the civil society and the government on the international trade commitments of Nigeria while strengthening public-private partnerships, civil society initiatives supported by the government and overall communication between institutions and civil society entities (United Nations, 2006). A Presidential Network Project was set up in August 2006 to link all Federal Government ministries and to provide an integrated national network that will incorporate local and State governments and their agencies. In the same year the government established the Galaxy Backbone, a public corporation set up with the main purpose of creating a technological platform for e-government amongst other functions (Sesan, 2007). In 2008 the Federal Government again set up the "ICT for Development" (ICT4D) strategic action plan committee. The ICT4D plan was targeted at using ICT to achieve Nigeria's Millennium Development Goals, NEPAD development initiatives and the World Summit on Information Society's plan of action (Adeyemo;17).

Many government agencies have established their presence online with the creation of websites but the efforts have been largely uncoordinated. Most of these websites do not have the capacity to allow citizens to interact with them online and their content and usability indices are adjudged low (Mundy & Musa, 2010). However few government organizations are at already creating avenues to fully transact business with their clientele online. These include Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) and Federal Internal Revenue Service (FIRS). The Joint Admissions Matriculation Board (JAMB) that conducts examinations into the nation's tertiary institutions now performs most of its operations online including registering for the examinations and checking for the results. Also a pilot scheme of electronically encoding the particulars of every vehicle and driver has taken off in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. This enables a Traffic Control Officer to get any information on any suspicious vehicle plate number and eliminates the unnecessary stops and embarrassments meted out to drivers by traffic control officer.
All these notwithstanding, e-government in Nigeria is yet to get to the stage of interacting online with the citizens. Inadequate infrastructural support has greatly militated against the success of e-government initiatives in Nigeria as it is estimated that out of

Nigeria's 150 million people, only 11% have access to internet facilities (Ifinedo, 2005). Nigeria has made commitment to e-governance over the years but has been quite slow in delivering what has been promised (Okonedo, 2009 & Oketola, 2011).

Issues and Implications For Public Libraries
Public libraries have always played a significant role in ensuring that there is free and open access to knowledge in the world more so information pertaining to government's activities. It is therefore no wonder that they are increasingly playing an integral role as service providers for e-government activities because they are often the only organizations within a community that can help individuals interact with government agencies and access e-government services. They play an important role in bridging the digital gap as it provides access to computers and the internet moving e-government services away from the exclusion of citizens with personal access to computers and internet to all who need the services (Bishop 2011). They serve as portals to access government information and aid greatly in providing front line reference service for websites of government agencies (Bradley, 2007). Consequently, public libraries can be said to provide a vital link between government and citizens as they make available critical community gateways to electronic government (IPAC, 2010).

The basic e-government services provided by public libraries include;
- granting access to and providing help in navigating government websites,
- assisting patrons to fill forms and composing and sending e-mails related to the forms,
- creating e-mail accounts and
- locating government information for different uses (Bishop 2011).

Some public libraries go on further to adopt a proactive approach to the provision of e-government services rather than just meeting demands as they arise. The services provided include;
- organizing classes and workshops for patrons on how to access government websites, programmes and electronic forms,
- collecting and distributing pamphlets on e-government services,
- creating one-on-one appointments for those seeking assistance with e-government services,
- dedicating computers for e-government services only and
- becoming an emergency information hub (Information Use Management and Policy Institute, 2009).

However, some e-government services are provided by public libraries in collaboration with government agencies and nonprofit organizations. These services include;
i. distributing handouts provided by government agencies and making available spaces for their trainings and interactions with the public,
ii. posting links to government websites,
iii. having a library liaison that meets regularly with government agencies and
iv. collaborative production of instructional materials by libraries and government agencies to guide users in accessing e-government services (Bertot, J.C., Sigler, K., McDermott, A., DeCoster, E., Katz, S., Langa, L. A. et al, 2011).

It can also be argued that as more government programmes go online, staffs that have been providing face-to-face service to citizens might face retrenchment from their jobs. People who might still need explanations or any other form of assistance in accessing government information and services will have no other recourse than to use the public library in the community for free access to computers and the internet, help in accessing government websites, completing online forms and receiving training on the use of computers and the internet (McClure, Gilvrary, Barton & Bertot, 2006). This signifies a shift from the traditional role of libraries as just providers of information. Librarians now handle government transactions as they assist citizens to access government services online. There are three indispensable components of e-government especially services on G2B, G2C and G2E tracks. These are;
- the public the public which can be the citizenry, businesses or government employees
- the government agency that provides information and services online and
- the networks and points of access that allow citizens to participate in the e-services.

However by seeking e-government information and services at the Public library and requesting assistance from librarians, the librarian has now become a fourth component of e-government services as a surrogate agency service provider (Gibson, Bertot, McClure, 2009). Libraries are therefore put in a position of providing services that they may not have the equipment, staff expertise and funding to deliver thus imposing a substantial management and infrastructural burden on the institutions.

Challenges for Nigerian Public Libraries
The full benefits of e-government can be realized only if citizens and businesses use the services. A country needs to be e-ready in terms of infrastructure

and the accessibility of computers with internet facilities to the population at large. Countries in South-Central Asia and Africa have the lowest average of e-government readiness when compared to North America and European countries. Africa in particular has a high prevalent rate of failure in the implementation of e-government programmes (Heeks, 2003); only South Africa is among the listed first twenty countries in the world to achieve a considerable level of e-Government success. This has been attributed to the low level ICT infrastructure in African countries. It has been suggested that e-government success is a form of ICT success.

Nigeria is the most populous black nation with an estimated population of more than 140 million people. 70% are said to be living in remote areas without access to internet facilities (Dada, 2007) despite the fact that the country now has the fastest growing and most profitable telecommunications and ICT market in Africa and third in the world behind China and Brazil (Aneke, 2009). Ayo and Ekong (2008) cited in Mundy and Musa (2010; 152) noted that usage of the internet which was virtually non-existent in Nigeria in 1999 had risen so much that it is estimated that a population of more than 10 million now have internet access. The telephone density (population of phone users) has also risen from 0.73 in 2001 to 47.98 in 2008.

Public libraries should provide three essential elements that are needed to ensure that all benefit from e-government services. These components are infrastructure, content and access (Newman, 2004). Emojorho (2010) had noted that a majority of public libraries in South-South Nigeria do not have ICT infrastructure thus they cannot access internet facilities so could not possibly offer e-government services. In a study of Fee based services in Public libraries in South East Nigeria it was also discovered that ICT facilities are largely absent in those libraries (Osuigwe & Udeze, 2011). Chisenga (2004) had pointed out that public libraries in sub-Saharan African are yet to fulfill their role in their various communities as universal access points to global information because of paucity of funds, inadequate or lack of ICT infrastructure and absence of ICT skills. When public libraries embrace technology they act as local gateways to information and aid in the promotion of democracy.

It has been generally observed that the public library in Nigeria is regarded as being established only for the purpose of acquiring and lending books to the public. The institution is rarely perceived as a tool for social, economic or political change (Opara, 2008). This lack of awareness of the multifaceted roles that the public library can play in its host community hampers the usage of even the meager ICT facilities

available. It has been noticed in Anambra State Public libraries that students rarely ask if there are internet facilities in the libraries with which to check JAMB scores. Their first and instinctive choices to perform such functions are the cyber cafes. These factors stand as hindrances to Nigerian public libraries playing effective roles in the provision of e-government services. It is therefore not surprising that Saliu (1999) had opined that the Nigerian public library still has a long way to go before it can contribute meaningfully to national development despite the fact that the institution has crucial roles to play in ensuring national growth. The practice of having branch libraries in different communities is a major advantage for Nigerian public libraries in the provision of e-government services.

However considering the fact that Nigeria is yet to optimally key into e-governance, public libraries in the country still have opportunities to reposition themselves as essential and integral components that would engender the success of e-government services. Public libraries ensure free, open and non-judgmental access to the world's knowledge including information about Government's activities at all levels thus providing an essential link between the people and governance and safeguarding democratic values. The provision of adequate ICT infrastructure and an intensive awareness drive about the roles of the public library in the society will place Nigerian public libraries in the right position to provide e-government services.

Recommendations
To create an enabling environment for public libraries to serve as access points for the provision of e-government information and services several measures need to be taken. It is therefore recommended that;

i.   a most fundamental step which is the building up of ICT infrastructure in Nigerian public libraries be taken as a matter of urgency,

ii. public libraries in Nigeria should undertake an all encompassing advocacy and public relations drive to create the awareness about their multifaceted roles in their various host communities,

iii. the role of public libraries as outlets for e-government services should be recognized through a legislation so that librarians could be shielded from liabilities that may arise from provision of wrong information either from government agencies or citizens who use the libraries for filling of electronic forms,

iv. public libraries should reach a nationwide consensus on how best to provide e-government services and resources,

v. library staff should be trained in the provision of e-government information and services,

vi. public libraries and government agencies should collaborate on the pattern and implementation of e-government services the library would be involved in and

vii. Federal, State and Local Government agencies should directly support public libraries as providers of e-government services and resources.

Conclusion

The existence and effective functioning of any government is predicated on its ability to deliver a wide range of services to its citizenry. Governments all over the world have recognized the opportunities provided by ICT and the internet for provision of services electronically. Irrespective of the fact that Nigeria is still at any early stage of e- government development measures need to be taken to ensure the success and sustainability of e-government services. The Public library because of its nature and accessibility is regarded as the most easily available of all public agencies for the provision of these services. They are most suited for dispensation of e-government services. They therefore need to gear up to the challenges of being access points for the provision of e-government services.

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