

Information And Communication Technology And Local Government Administration In Covid-19 And Post Pandemic Era In Delta State, Nigeria

ASOYA Nkem P., EWUIM Ngozi C. (PhD), OBI Emeka F. and CHIAHA Blessing U.

Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Anambra State
Correspondence email: femeka2019@gmail.com (OBI E. F.)

Abstract: *The paper examined information and communication technology (ICT) and local government administration COVID-19 and post pandemic era in Delta State, Nigeria. The concept of information communication technology as well as local government administration was critically examined. Benefits of ICT on effective local government administration were also identified to include; increased accessibility, inclusivity and flexibility in government service delivery; improved value for money and quality service provision through lower cost delivery options. This paper also highlights that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can and should be used as a tool for reforming the ills of modern bureaucratic organizations; while the challenges of funding, ICT infrastructure and lack of skills constitute a significant barrier to the utilization of ICT in Delta State, Nigeria. It was concluded that information communication technology has great impact on local government administration as it simplifies the service delivery process while engendering transparency and accountability among local government officials towards its citizens. It also provides ample options for administrative processes to continue smoothly even beyond the four walls of the office setting as well as ensure the elimination of location and distance barriers in the delivery of public services. It was therefore recommended that provision of ICT infrastructure in forms of hardware and software devices be provided to the local government for improved service delivery at the local level. The development of a robust ICT policy in Delta State towards domesticating the Nigeria policy should be paramount.*

Keywords: ICT, Local Government Administration.

Introduction

The advent of the novel coronavirus pandemic has effectively altered the nature and scope of most business and governance transactions and activities. At the heart of this transformation is the increasing role of Information and Communication Technology in the conduct of private and government business. In addition to the potentials for enhancing efficiency and effectiveness, ICT has also proven to ensure work stability as it affords its users the opportunity to break the barriers of the office walls and operate from any location, including working from home – telework. Before the pandemic, there has been increased calls for better service delivery in government generally and local government in particular. This has informed the compelling need for public sector organizations to continually align its work processes and operations to the almost limitless possibilities of digitalization in order to meet the growing and dynamic needs for better quality delivery of public services.

The quest for quality service delivery by government institutions and agencies in Nigeria has, over the years, necessitated the need for governance reforms in terms of institutional and operational capabilities and competencies. All over the world, especially from the latter part of the twentieth century, government institutions – especially in the developed societies - have gradually and systematically adopted models to ensure the needed paradigm shift from manual to automation and ultimately to full digitalization of their activities and operations leveraging on the many platforms of ICT.

To this end, ICT has proven to be an important support tool for government agencies and institutions in their quest to deliver public goods and services in an efficient, convenient, timely and user friendly manner. The above assertion is evident with the experiences of the gains of ICT in developed societies and its potentials to enthrone transparency, accountability and reduce the incidents of corrupt practices as well as ensuring that the communication gap between the people and the government is effectively reduced or bridged, thus, enhancing governance inclusiveness.

In recognizing the importance of technology for better service delivery, the Nigerian government, like most of its counterparts in the developing world, have formulated policies to tap into the potentials of ICT. In 2007, for instance, the Nigerian parliament passed the National Information Technology Development Agency Act to provide a legal framework for ICT adaptation and utilization in the Nigerian public sector. To this end, the ICT adaptation have become the norm in most federal and state government institutions and agencies, but what has been the situation at the local government level?

Nigeria currently has 774 local governments across the federation while Delta State has twenty-five (25) local governments' areas with each having their own governance structure. If the ICT implementation is to be realized across the Nigeria public sector for effective service delivery - especially as the world adjust to the reality of technology aided virtual meetings, conferences and work processes, the local governments must not be left behind. It is for this reason that this paper interrogates the influence of information and communication technology in local governments' administration in COVID-19 and post pandemic era in Delta State, Nigeria.

Concept of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

ICT encompasses an array of technological platforms, tools and resources used to connect, communicate, disseminate, and manage large scale information of diverse formats. These technological platforms include the use of computers, internet connectivity, broadband facilities for television and radio transmission as well as telephone (Blurton, 2002). In government settings, ICT deals with the use of information and communication technology for data processing and storage, information dissemination and feedback. This includes electronic mails, computerization, use of social media platforms for information dissemination (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.). According to Smithburg (2007), ICT embraces all forms of learning at all levels, both formal and informal, that uses an information network – the internet, an intranet (LAN) or extranet also referred to as online learning.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Nigeria revolution is far-reaching and has high visibility as it originated as Information Technology (IT) until recently when it was thought that the communication element needs to be underlined as a result of its importance. As a result, the idea was transformed to its current form - Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Olusanya & Olayede, 2013). ICT's usage has contributed immensely to remarkable growth in critical areas such as e-literacy, e-commerce and electronic finance, e-governance, e-transaction, e-learning etc.

Various ICT projects such as e-choupal, Warana, TARAAhaat, and Gyandoot have enlightened and empowered Nigerian rural communities in setting up shops for browsing online for JAMB, WASC, Post-JAMB registration etc. ICT has also made it possible for poor rural communities to be able to access – in real time, relevant information about happenings around the world as well as essential services like education, healthcare, business opportunities and employment. Thus, the anticipated benefits of any ICT for development projects are numerous which include e-literacy, knowledge dissemination, poverty reduction, community and women's empowerment, transparency in business and other transactions, increased productivity and better health care practices.

According to Ehilha (2008), ICT provides the basic hope in this information age because they play a dual role of firstly, enhancing Nigerian's international economic position by building on the success of the Nigeria software industry and secondly, contributing to solving the problems associated with poverty and underdevelopment in the country.

One of the most profitable ICT related businesses is the business, which according to Danda (2004) provides such revenue generating services as computer education, astrology, photography and the internet. However, he notes that a number of factors, notably business operator profile and personality, location of the business demographic factors, and service availability affect the business. Ramessur (2009) noted that significant efforts are required to design, develop and internalize the ICT solutions through well managed reengineering of back-end processes and capacity building efforts to ensure sustainability.

Cultural background also affects the acceptance of Information and Communication Technology [ICT] in developing countries (Fred, 2005). Cultural ideals and demographic features such as gender, age and an individual's level of education influences their disposition towards the acceptance or otherwise of ICT initiatives. However, Fred (2005) reported that a person's decision to accept technology and take part in ICT skills development course is strongly influenced by the level of public promotion of the project.

David (2009) posits that adequate flow of information in particular and an appropriate use of the mass media could make a contribution towards national, economic and social development of the society. He adds that information flow could help a developing nation to mobilize resources for modernizing many of its people's life patterns and in doing so bring about the necessary social change speedily. Danda (2004) also underlines the fact that communication has a significant role to play in the diffusion of innovations to the rural localities. Communication creates awareness and interest, encourages people to evaluate, try and eventually adopt an innovation.

As an agent of social change, communication is vital because there is the need for people to be educated, informed and persuaded. Information must have a two-way flow so that the needs of the underdeveloped population are identified and the people can participate in the act of nation building (George, 2002). He further says that only formal education has the potential to transfer new ideas and skills from the modernizing cities to traditional villages. Lee and Perry (2008) stress that the way communication is handled may lead people to accept or reject a planned development project. According to George (2002), an individual's decision to adopt

or reject an innovation is contingent upon the relative advantage, compatibility, complexity or simplicity, trial-ability of the proposed innovation.

The different nature of Information Technology is a product of hundreds of years of evolution. Its usage in recent times makes reference of a collection of the whole range of technologies providing a model for the acquisition, storage, transmission, processing and retrieval of information. According to Agboola (2007), since the evolution of human society, humanity has found the exchange of information as a veritable tool of social interaction, and from time immemorial, man has used various methods to record information. He further stated that these methods ranged from clay table in the ancient times through the papyrus, parchment and wax, to sophisticated form of paper, film and magnetic tape. Also the method of communication information ranged from voice, signal or carrier pigeon. As the society became more sophisticated and complex over the centuries, the medium by which information is exchanged between persons or groups also developed to an unprecedented sophisticated level whereby it is not easy to communicate with only the traditional methods (Mojeed, 2006).

The first attempt made by communication scientists and engineers to get people in the same localities or at different parts of the world to communicate came through the intervention of telegraph technology (Agochukwu, 2007) There were also development in the field of telecommunication in the way of telephone and other innovations, such as Private Automatic Branch Exchange (PABET) television, Automatic Teller Machine (ATM), and Facsimile Machine (Fax) among others. The computer which is an electronic equipment was introduced, and this powerful tool of communication had brought profound changes and advancement into the telecommunication system over the past two decades (Agboola, 2007). The development in computer and communication technology through the introduction of microprocessor and microcomputers has brought a new dimension to the program of information handling. All these developments facilitate better and quicker services to the user.

Such transmission systems enable business environments which are populated by organizations with decentralized offices and branches dispersed over various cities and countries of the world to monitor, control and exchange information between the central offices and the branches. Corporate managers and business executives have therefore found out that they could benefit from the on-going integration between computer and telecommunication. Even, the public sector organizations are not left out (Mojeed, 2006).

According to Manfred (2010), technology develops in three stages, in the first stage technology enables us to do things, that we have been doing, but to do them better, cheaper and faster. In the second stage, technology provides new capabilities and enables us to do things that we had not been able to do previously, in the third stage, technology becomes an integral part of our activities; it affects the way we do things and changes our life style.

Concept of Local Government Administration

Local government system exists in every country of the world but with variations in its structures and functions. As a concept, local government means different things to different scholars, but in context, there is an unanimity of views as to the fact that local government is a system of government that exist within a larger governmental setting. Also, no matter how differently the concept is defined, it focusses on the transfer of political powers to local areas by involving the inhabitants in the provision of the basic needs in their respective communities. In the views of Appadorai (2005), local government represents a governmental founded on the common choices of the people at the grassroots and charged with the executive and administrative duties in matters affecting the people at the district or local level. In other words, local government exists at the local or grassroots level with the aim of meeting the peculiar need of the people at that level. It is the lowest unit of administration whose laws and regulations, the communities who live in a defined geographical area and with common social and political ties are subjected (Fadeyi, 2009).

The United Nations defines local government as an administrative and political sub-division of a nation or state (in a federal system) which is constituted by law and has substantial control in matters affecting the locality. The institution is also vested with powers to exact labour or impose taxes for approved purposes. The composition of the governing body of such an institution is either chosen during elections or selected from among the local people. Osakede and Ijimakinwa (2014) define local government as the tiers of government closest to the people which are vested with certain powers to exercise control over the affair of people in its domain.

The 1999 constitution stipulates the functions and powers of the levels of government in such a way that no one level of government can single handedly perform the functions of delivering services to the people without the input and cooperation of others. Nigerian federalism, like other federal systems of government, is characterized by diverse ethnic groups, languages, culture, political affiliation as well as struggle for political power. Therefore, there is the need fashion out modalities to cater for the different elements and ensure effective delivery of social services at the grassroot level, thus, informing the formation of local government as a system of government (Fadeyi, 2009).

From the above analysis, local government, by virtue of Section 7 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), became a tier of government below the federal and state governments. The status of a constitutionally recognized tier of government confers on it some measures of autonomy. Scholars have however argued that as a government within a government, local government can, at best, enjoy quasi autonomy that still allows for some measure of interface with other levels of government. The quasi autonomy nature of local government should ideally, ensure some measure of independence from other levels of government and a sense of mutual respect in intergovernmental relationships. This informs the existence of a supreme court to arbitrate in cases of dispute and conflict (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2009).

This notwithstanding, there has been incidences of intergovernmental dispute arising from a cold war between the local government and their respective state government or the federal government. The crux of the misunderstanding has always centered around the issue of meddlesome interloping and undue interference by the state government most especially. These issues center around the unconstitutional appointment of local government Chairmen and arbitrary removal of validly elected local government chairmen by some state governments. For instance, in 2010, Edo State governor Oshiomhole dissolved the elected local government council and replaced them with his own appointees (Osakede & Ijimakinwa, 2014), thereby aborting the constitutionally guaranteed tenure of office for local government chairmen. Also the issue of joint state-local government account and what the states perceive to be an attempt by the federal government to relate directly to local governments has also been a bone of contention.

In view of the unhealthy relationship that the local government has with other levels of government, it becomes imperative in this paper for us to stress that while the local government in a federal state is legally not an appendage of any other level of government, it exist as a level of government with its own statutory mandate some of which are a follows;

- **To bring governance closer to the people:** Local government function is to bring democracy to the local citizens as well as to educate and socialize them politically. This will enhance participation of the citizens in governance which is one of the underlying percepts of democracy. (Aigbakoba & Ogbonna, 2004).
- **For administrative convenience:** Local government serves as a channel through which policies and programmes from the state and federal government are communicated and implemented. By nature and character, the federal and state governments are not geographically contiguous to the hinterlands and rural communities and as such cannot effectively penetrate those areas like the local government in the areas of birth registration, registration of deaths and marriages, radio and television licensing, etc. Therefore, local government was created to serve as a channel through which government policies and programmes are effectively communicated and vigorously implemented (Aigbakoba & Ogbonna, 2004).
- **To Ensure that resources are effectively mobilized:** This is to arouse in the citizens the zeal or willingness to contribute financially, materially and morally to the management of local affairs. Local governments exist to engender sustainable development at the local level, especially the rural areas, through the effective mobilization and utilization of the resources of the local people. Local government use the fund made available to it by both federal and state governments and their internally generated revenue to improve on the lives of the people within their areas of operations.
- Other reasons are to preserve heritage and common interest of the people, serve as a hedge against over-concentration of power at the centre which often leads to tyranny, its acts as a two-way channel of communication between the local population and the central government and it aggregates local interest and transmits these to the centre and also keeps the local population informed about central government policies and programmes.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Local Government Administration in COVID-19 pandemic era in Delta State, Nigeria

The innovation of information technology in the recent years and its increasing role in development has made it desirable for government of Delta State to enhance Information and Communication Technology for socio economic transactions of the state. This is even more imperative as the world turns to ICT as solution to sustain governance and business operations in the face of economic lockdowns and social distancing occasioned by the coronavirus pandemic. With the growing complexity of knowledge, the speed with which it is being updated, and the sheer quantity of information to be interpreted, people today need to engage in structured and systematic learning throughout their lives. With modern information technologies, they can do so at their own pace and outside their organization. The potentiality of local government employee to reach their clients worldwide is enormous and the cost of this access is very low in comparison to traditional approaches (Adigun, 2005).

The local government staff has made the physical document in their organization to be reduced with the help of information and communication technology. They are no longer keeping enormous document as most sensitive and important ones has been micro filmed and some information stored in computer diskette and tape. Information and Communication Technology has made local government employees to improve their skills and abilities. Most of the employees of the local government acquire computer knowledge as a result of the adoption of information and communication technological equipment (Osakede & Ijimakinwa, 2014).

The use of in-house computer in preference to computer service bureau has helped the Administration to maintain security and secrecy over its official information. It has become an indispensable tool for individual and the nation as a result of empowerment, improvements, development and the actualization of service that was why Debela (2009) emphasized that automation of manual activities has been affecting the blue-collar workers.

Debela (2009) further emphasized that automation of office operations has transformed the landscape of office work with its multiplier effects on the knowledge, skills and competence of the workers. The use of ICT assists and improves the delivery of service in local government due to high qualities of processing of information and maximum efficiency in all area that involve the knowledge of ICT. At this junction, it is instructive to know that ICT is relevant to both public and private organizations as well as individuals. It can be used in organization function such as coordinating, administrative planning, controlling, directing, budgeting, reporting and staffing. It implies therefore that high efficiency in the local government area activities of Delta State can be achieved through ICT. Above all, ICT ensures continuity in governance as it offers public officials the opportunity to work from home and ensure that the core COVID-19 protocols of social and physical distancing are maintained without impediment to public service delivery at the local level.

Information and Communication Technology as a Panacea for Effective Local Government Administration

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can be used as a tool for reforming the Local government system in modern administration. According to Osakede & Ijimakinwa (2014), ICT can be a driver and enabler of change to reform Local government administration by reengineering and reinventing to serve society better. The application of ICT can foster improvements in collaborations and information sharing within government officials, and can thus make government flexible, responsive and efficient. A report from the World Bank reveals that availability of technology is a driver as well as an enabler of change by making certain types of government functions more feasible and creating new expectations from them. The report claimed that e-government (ICT) can be a major contributor to reform Local Government and ICT in many areas.

Various researchers and policy analysts are also optimistic or convinced about the potential of e-government to reform Local government. Electronic government is seen as being a more collaborative style of government, featuring more collaboration with external sectors in making policy and in delivering services, more collaboration with citizens and among employees within the workplace (Bellamy & Taylor, 2005). ICT enables new information flows that challenge pat norms and capabilities. Proposed e-government initiatives can allow local government officials to transcend its traditional hierarchical structures of accountability. Fountain (2005) writes that Information technology in conjunction with the redesign of organizational process flows has diminished the amount of red tape and accelerated the delivery of government services for some members of the public. Okot-Uma (2010) posits that, electronic Government (e-governance) offers an opportunity for governments to re-invent themselves, get closer to citizenry and forge closer alliances and partnerships with diverse communities of interest, leveraging on various levels of expertise, all within the scope of ensuring national development.

The objectives of ICT in Local Government Administration is to improve and increase productivity in different ways, including improving efficiency in resources distribution, reducing transaction cost and increasing technical improvement (Mojeed, 2006). It is also to support the technical functions associated with acquisitions, technical processing of administrative work, supporting information storage, retrieval and dissemination systems as well as supporting management information services for the public. This can best be used in service and orientation courses for practicing-administrators.

Local government administration traditionally is about maintenance of law and order in the society but over the years, rules and regulations themselves do not suffice to maintain satisfactory condition for Local government performance, which only furnish the grounds for healthy organization and constructive outcomes, but do not account for its effectiveness and efficiency (Vigoda, 2009). The application of information and communication technology in the Local Government Administration has however reversed this trend.

During the last decade developments in information and communication technology (ICT) drastically changed the daily life of citizens and their relationship with governments. The revolution of ICT and e-government influence the citizen transformation in relation with the administration through improvement of service delivery in one hand and vice-versa communication on the other hand. ICT is a resource for renovating local government that allows drastic transformations toward quality change, and in improving service delivery to the citizens at the grass-root level.

The gains in efficiency and effectiveness are focused on different fields of reforming and simplifying administrative procedures starting from modernizing recruitment procedures, improving decision making, combating corruption, enabling trade of information,

reducing costs, enhancing the coherence and coordination of organizations as well as, consolidating basic principles of good governance etc.

The transformation of public administration was made possible by the use of ICT in the daily performance of government. Most crucial aspect of this development is to prioritize the use of ICT across various sectors and levels of government in line with the overall public sector reform strategies. The use of Information and Communication Technology can significantly transform the way in which services are offered to citizens as it reduces or completely eliminates bureaucratic and logistical barriers and obstacles, thus, empowering the public in general to actively take part in policy formulation and implementation, as well as help to ensure transparency in the use of public funds.

In the World Wide Web (www), the Internet has become the most obvious symbol of the information and communication society. People want to be able to access information quickly, and easily making ICT expedient as citizens in many countries began seeking more advanced public services from their governments. A strong accountability between citizens and the government is a crucial prerequisite for public administration ICT relationship that is achieved through the use of a variety of political, economic, legal and administrative instruments designed to prevent corruption and ensure that public officials are responsible and accessible to the citizens they serve. Government investment in technology offers substantial benefits in the forms of:

- i. Increased accessibility, inclusivity and flexibility in government service delivery and the ability for more of the community to interact with government, with the flexibility of choice offered by multiple delivery channels and at more convenient times,
- ii. Improved value for money: It enables quality services to be provided through lower cost delivery options and it also improved productivity both of public servants and the economy,
- iii. Stimulation of the ICT industry through identification of opportunities for innovation and partnering with the private sector to improve government service delivery.

Sweanyana & Busier (2007) strongly agree that ICT in local government provides increased savings, increased efficiency, improved service delivery, low transaction costs, and improved market performance to the organization that invests in ICT. According to Sweanyana & Busier (2007), the use of ICT by firms in developing countries differs in developed societies in the level of usage and adoption as because there are various factors such as high cost of hardware, software, internet and ICT professional, which inhibit governments to adopt appropriate policies to address them.

The report indicate that e-governance has improved service delivery of that specific service in terms of clearer information, better quality, modernized and personalized service and speedy process. The study claims that e-services still has certain weaknesses in terms of double processes (physical and online), wrong communication and lack of options for feedback.

According to Bolgherini (2006), a critical analysis of the e-government policies had claimed that technology alone does not necessarily provide more access and more participation. As massive technological intervention is not enough for reinventing local government online, other variables should be taken into consideration. Political, cultural and administrative traditions, interplay with country-specific peculiarities to determine the success or otherwise of e-government initiatives. She, thus, argued that any opportunity and push for change and actual influence on administrations, governments, and societies, prompted by the new technologies, should endure important variables of political, social and cultural nature.

The first theme that emerges is that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can and should be used as a tool for reforming the ills of modern bureaucratic organizations. According to this view, ICT can be a driver and enabler of change and reform due to its boundary challenging nature, and governments can be re-engineered and re-invented via ICT to serve society better. This view holds that the key features of Weberian bureaucracy, hierarchy, division of labour and rigidity of rules have led to a situation in bureaucratic organizations where processes are 'stove piped' (i.e highly inflexible) and information is held in 'silos' (i.e not shared properly); this has resulted in government bureaucracies being inflexible and unresponsive to the needs of citizens.

It is important to note here that in all intents and purposes, ICT is the acclaimed engine room of modern day global development and sustainable growth (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2005). In the same vein, Anaehobi (2007) maintains that no institution or organization can still rely on the traditional printed information resources to perform efficiently. Therefore, the infusion of ICT into local government administration enhances efficiency in the delivery of services to the people. Henir (2000), is of the view that ICT assists in the making of time saving and quality administrative decisions for the benefit of both the administrator and the administered.

Challenges to ICT utilization in Local Government Administration

Although there are so many benefits of ICT usage in the administration of local government in Delta State and Nigeria at large, it is pertinent however not to shy away from the associated challenges. Some which are -

1. **Lack of Physical Facilities and Funds-** Majority of local government offices lack computers, internet connectivity, scanners, printers and other ICT tools. Consequently, they have not been able to adopt ICT fully. Funding for the said equipment is shelved on every occasion for other activities.
2. **Lack of Political Will-** The political space of Nigeria democracy has shown little or no will towards ICT implementation. This is shown in budgetary provisions and spending. Many of the political office holders still prefer to contract their ICT related activities to private firms rather than domicile in the local government offices.
3. **Lack of Training among LG workers** – Most of the local government Heads are poor and indifferent towards the professional growth of their staff especially on ICT related skills. Many of the staff are ignorant of the new trends in their area of work due to lack of training and retraining as many offices still uses typewriting machines.
4. **Lack of Cooperation** - It is unfortunate that workers at the local government have not been able to adopt ICT due to noncooperation of their working environment. The administrators are not always willing to extend their facilities to the workers for trying out new ideas because they do not want any disturbances to their daily routine.
5. **Lack of Expertise of the staff-** Majority of local government offices are manned by workers with little or no knowledge in ICT, its skills and usage for service delivery thereby rendering ICT implementation a mirage in the public sector.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper concluded that information and communication technology has great impact on local government administration. It simplifies the service delivery process while engendering transparency and accountability among local government officials towards its citizens. Above all, it ensures stability in government and governance as it provides ample options for administrative processes to continue smoothly even beyond the four walls of the office setting as well as ensure the elimination of location and distance barriers in the delivery of public services. The study therefore recommends the following:

1. Provision of ICT infrastructures in forms of hardware and software devices to the local government for improved service delivery at the local level.
2. Training and retraining of local of government officials on the use of ICT tools and devices so as to improve their job performance towards the citizenry.
3. The development of a robust ICT policy in Delta State towards domesticating the Nigeria policy to give institutional framework and backing to ICT usage at the State and local government areas.
4. Recruitment, selection and promotion of local government officials should be ICT compliant so as to meet the yearnings of the people in service delivery and good governance.
5. Adequate Funding & Budgetary provisions must be instituted by State and Local Governments to cater for ICT development in the area of provision of ICT Infrastructure for quality service delivery.

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