

An E-readiness Survey of Selected Federal Ministries in Nigeria for Freedom of Information (FOI) and E-government Implementation

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Abstract

This study, using modified pointers, surveyed the e-readiness of selected ministries in Nigeria under the twin imperatives of the Freedom of Information Act 2011 and the E-government undertaking 2012, both of which have concomitant demands for re-engineering information management processes and IT infrastructure for services to citizens, business stakeholders and to other MDAs (ministries, departments and agencies). The survey found out that after almost a decade of policies and directives, apart from the establishment of informational websites, none of the ministries have re-engineered its infrastructure, or trained its personnel for the above imperatives. This status can be attributed to lack of coordinated effort at the federal level, lack of a revised national public administrative model for record and information management aligned to the digital imperative, lack of a clear mandate for ITC departments and units and absence of sectoral budgets for records and information management.

Keywords: *E-government, e-readiness, freedom of information*

Introduction

Transparency, accountability and efficiency are values continuously harped on as the factors that can sustain democracy in Africa. The promulgation of freedom of information laws gained momentum across the world since ten years ago. By 2001, over 200 have enacted the FOI law which aims to achieve access to governance data sets by citizens, NGOs and public servants themselves for better understanding and input into the affairs of governance.

With the advent of the digital age that strive on the backbone of telecommunications, computer and internet advances, e-government also gained currency. E-government like FOI share the imperatives of re-engineering information management processes and IT infrastructure in public institutions to achieve efficient service delivery to citizens, businesses and other institutions.

Although Nigeria ranks as middle in the UN Online Services Index (OSI) and e-government Development Index (EGDI), it does not feature among the top ten in Africa (UNO, 2016). However despite infrastructural deficiencies, Nigeria had passed the FOI law and is embarking on e-government since 2012. These embarkations (FOI & e-government) have been preceded by some extant policies and laws regarding record and information management. In 1992, the National Archive of Nigeria Act was passed to establish the National Archives of Nigeria with the sole responsibility of managing and preserving public records. It was a glaring repetition of clauses of the 1954 Act despite having two UNESCO experts (Albada & Bower, 1989) carrying out a national study. Prominent among the functions of the National Archive is Part 1 (D&E) the selection and microfilming of archives essential to the continuity of the Federal Government. As early as 1992, the Federal

Government has been aware of the need for the preservation of institutional memories in all formats including film, but focus on its bureaucratic aspect, poor funding and “lack of appreciation of the importance of archives, obsolete equipment and high staff turnover” as observed by Abiola (2007) resulted into poor executions of its functions.

In 2008, the national legislature attempted to repeal the 1992 Act, but again had focused on its bureaucratic aspects like governing councils, allowances of members and tenures rather than on processes and technical implications especially in regard to the implementation of the FOI Act which was then in its reading stage. The confusion relating to the museum role of the National Archives and the need for a modern archiving role in view of recent IT advances continued. The bill which did not progress since 2008 failed to emphasize the role of the body in training personnel of various MDAs in modern method of record keeping, especially in transiting to electronic document management and the focus on networking resources rather than acting as a central repository of records and information.

It was the enactment of the Freedom of Information in 2011 that actually started to demand public institutions to organize and maintain records and information in an accessible manner. It turned out to be a tall order because of its attendant demand for technology and skills necessary to implement and manage electronic records and documents. The clause on record keeping and maintenance (10: 1-2) states as follows: “(1) Every government and public institution shall ensure that it keeps every information or record about the institution's operations, personnel, activities and other relevant or related information or records. (2) Every government or public institution shall ensure the proper organization and maintenance of all information or record in its custody, in a manner that facilitates public access to such information or record under this act”. The legislative demands contained in the FOI Act presume that government and public institutions can be held accountable for actions that the development of government policies can be traced in real historical terms and that such well-preserved records can provide resources for future decision-making.

Thereafter a number of directives and policies purported to have impact on information processes and management in public service was promulgated. For instance Chapter Ten of The Revised Civil Service Handbook (2014) dwells on records management in the civil service by again pointing to the importance of maintaining institutional memory through the preservation of records (p61) “The duty of the Civil Service to provide continuity mainly through reference to the decisions of past governments, can as such be better appreciated when we visualize what would have been the case were we not to have the Service to perform this most critical role of preservation of official records. In essence, therefore, the records and materials it generates within the system on a daily basis constitute the life blood of the Civil Service and, by extension, of Government”. The chapter however fails to elaborate on how computerization can be used to automate the creation, distribution, preservation, retrieval, and disposal of records especially considering the imperative of the FOI Act and the e-Government initiative. Although the chapter acknowledges the use of microcomputers and software in enhancing the record keeping process it avoided delving into even how computerization can help in indexing and file tracking, exercises that are notoriously cumbersome in almost all MDAs not to talk on how information or policy can be traced in real time upon demand.

A recent directive by the presidency that could influence the implementation of FOIA and e-government is the Harmonization of Biometric Data 2015-2017, a directive that aims to eradicate the duplication of data on citizens in various agencies that document people for the

issuance of passports, driver's license, Voter cards, Tax payer, SIM registration and National Identity Cards. The agency entrusted to implement the policy is the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) created by an act in 2007. After reviewing a process for harmonizing data across various MDAs, NIMC presented - the Harmonization and Integration Policy for the National Identity Management System for Nigeria. The agency believes the strategy will provide, "a basis for the development of a framework for the implementation of the mandate of the NIMC in the areas of identity infrastructure, database, access, integration and management, uniform standards and methods for the collection, treatment, storage / retrieval, and use/management of demographic and biometric data in government agencies and by extension, in the private sector". As of 2017, only 30 million citizens were captured by NIMC and various stake holding agencies continue to collect and use data that are resident in their organizations or portals including the recent continuation of voter registration and SIM Card registration by telecom companies.

From the above, one can appreciate that Nigeria has not lacked cogent policies and laws suitable for the implementation of its FOIA and e-government initiatives, the challenges lie in several factors as this study gathered, and will discuss.

Methodology

The study used a combination of survey questionnaire and open ended interviews with officials assigned by respective ministries for the study. The pointers used (Appendix A) are modified indices based mainly on the tool proposed by the International Records Management Trust, 1989, with the hindsight of the dimensions of e-government environment as developed by ITU (since 1989) that focus on outreach, governance, policy and infrastructure; dimensions that also tally with the key areas targeted by the Nigerian government since 2012. The Ministry of Communication Technology is the implementing agency of e-government in Nigeria. The ministries targeted for the pivotal implementation of the e-government project in 2012, were: Ministries of education, agriculture, communications, trade & investment, and health. I added Justice, PWH (works, power, and housing) and FCTA (Federal Capital territory Administration) in the survey due to their strategic importance in the current development efforts in Nigeria.

Ministry of Education	www.education.gov.ng/
Ministry of Agriculture	https://fmard.gov.ng/
Ministry of Communication Technology	commtech.gov.ng/
Ministry of Trade & Investment	https://fmic.gov.ng
Ministry of Health	www.health.gov.ng/
Ministry of Power, Works & Housing	www.pwh.gov.ng/
Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA)	fcda.gov.ng
Ministry of Justice	www.justice.gov.ng

Three key initiatives were modestly targeted for the pilot run in 2012, "i) Connected government: involving the deployment of ICT to provide better response to citizens' demands, improve service delivery and make administration more efficient, ii) Informed Citizenry: This includes the use of Web and New Media to improve citizen engagement and drive efficiency in government, iii) Open Government/ Open Data Initiative: This is to increase non-sensitive government datasets online in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act".

The study assessed four aspects of the eReadiness of ministries;

- i) eServices (websites, intranets & digitisation),
- ii) Management & Policies (planning for FOIA, Filing systems, Basic records and information management policy, Relation between ICT and Record & information management, Budgeting),
- iii) Infrastructure & IT support (Systems for records management, use of EDRM, existence of ICT Department/Unit and its mandate, availability of computers, existence of LAN and whether files and resources are shared, and the sustenance of power supply)
- iv) Personnel (Assigning records management and information to specific managers and staff, existence of a Chief Technology Officer as proposed by the Ministry of Communication Technology, availability of qualified information management staff and training).

Analysis & Discussions

E-government depends on the e-readiness of various dimensions of governance such as ICT infrastructure, management and policies, and human resource capability. Government sector must be able to provide automated services both internally to civil servants and externally to the public in an effective, efficient and reliable way. Both the United Nations E-Government Survey (2016) and the ITU (2017) Measuring the Information Society Report show the enormous penetration of computers and mobile phones in Nigeria in the last decade, devices that are crucial to realizing e-government, but on their own cannot create e-government without the necessary harnessing of their potentials in service delivery.

E-Services

The first most important aspect of e-government is the on-line presence, where information about an MDA (Ministry, Department or Agency) is presented, the services it offer automated, a window for its transactions with citizens and businesses opened, and the data it generates on daily or periodic basis offered for analysis and policy making.

eServicesInternetIntranet	Frequency	Percent
MDAPostedNonsensitiveGovernmentDatasetsOnline	8	100.00 %
MDAhaveaWebsite	8	100.00 %
WebsitehaveLinkstoOtherMinistriesandParastatals	6	75.00 %
HaveMDAReceivedRequestForInformationFromOutsideinthePast2Years	2	25.00 %
TheWebsiteHaveOnlineServicesorTransactions	1	12.50 %
MDAProvideAccesstoSharedDocumentsWithinUsingComputers	0	0.00 %
WebsiteProvideSearchableDataforInquiriesandResearch	0	0.00 %

Table 1: E-Services Pointers

Access to public services online is a prime target of e-government by re-engineering services to the people especially in queries, payments, form-filling, bookings and various types of registrations that citizens require to function in their nations.

All the MDAs have websites (Table 1) that at least host basic information and news about the ministries thanks to the Ministry of Communication flagship, Government Services portal. The other outreach dimensions like online services and transactions are not developed,

despite being key to e-government. Similarly the development of intranets to make information sharing and inquiries efficient, has not being contemplated by even a single ministry by the time of this study, thereby reducing IT infrastructure in MDAs to mainly sharing internet connection.

Even in ministries where open data is highly valuable, it is not presented in a searchable form and is generally fragmented. The National Health Management Information, although having a link on the Ministry of Health's website, is closed to outreach public, policy analysts and researchers, and does not even provide a window for registration. Under its programs menu, many projects are listed, but on click display statistical reports which are not up-to-date. The weekly epidemiological reports which started in May, 2015 for instance, had only reports that stopped in October, 2015.

Most ministries are contented to provide annual reports in PDF formats, without providing searchable databases of vital statistics. The Ministry of Education for instance, need to have searchable data of enrolments, number of schools, teachers, etc. for stakeholders, researchers and policy makers to compute their pointers rather than relying on fragmented reports. Unless data is presented in a searchable form, its usage becomes limited and cumbersome if analysis and reporting are intended.

Even the FCDA website lack online services, transactions and queries, especially regarding housing, urban development and infrastructure. Considering the essence of urban development services and the centrality of the capital city in the nation, a certain level of responses to inquiries and searches should be expected.

Moreover, even where a ministry hosts a vital national function, this lack of interactivity prevails. The Ministry of Justice for instance hosts the FOIA (Freedom of Information) website, a vital law. Although a number of informational content and reports are uploaded, again it doesn't host the interface for information request, a central service that could have saved the time and a likely default by MDAs (ministries, departments and agencies) in treating inquiries. Being an intermediary agent would also have re-affirmed the ministry's role as the enforcer of the FOI Act.

It is only the Ministry of Trade and Investment that has a functional transactional website. It appears to be a central window for Nigeria to foreigners and citizens. The website act as a central receptacle for tax matters, business registration, custom & excise services and licensing matters.

A similar data-centric website is, The Nigeria Millennium Development Goals Information System (2015), which host data for over 260,000 health, education and water resource points across the country. The data was collected as a project for poverty reduction policies and information for stakeholders and donor agencies relating to Nigeria' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Best practices demand that MDAs have links to the websites hosting transactional aspects of their services or vital data regarding their resources. Currently none of the ministries have such links directing visitors to such websites.

Management & Policies

Although 87% of ministries (Table 2) are aware of the imperative to organize for the full implementation of the FOI Act, information management is still a departmental issue and the presence of computers and quite often LAN, have not changed the way records and

information are managed. Less 40% of surveyed ministries have information management policy, budgets for that, or considering the automation of record keeping, archiving and circulation of files and tracking. For instance, despite the creation of an archiving center since 2005, the FCTA could still not attain a budget for its needs for digitization, and the hardware and software requirements of the center. None of the ministries have evaluated their record keeping and circulation and how the presence of microcomputers and LAN can help. The absence of IT strategy pervades all the ministries studied and shows how ICT infrastructure alone cannot achieve the implementation of e-government without a conscious policy designed to transform both the role of ICT in administration and the training and orientation of staff to imbibe innovations

InfoManagementAndPolicies	Frequency	Percent
FilingSystemandCirculationisManual1	8	100.00 %
AwareofFreedomofInformationAct2014	7	87.50 %
MDAhasformallyorganizedforFOIActimplementation	6	75.00 %
InformationManagedonEachDeptComputer	5	62.50 %
AnnualBudgetForRecordandInformationManagement	3	37.50 %
ICTHasChangedMDARecordKeepingandManagement	3	37.50 %
RecordsAreFrequentlyLostonMisplaced	3	37.50 %
TheMDAHaveaBasicRecordsandInformationManagementPolicy	2	25.00 %
FilingSystemandCirculationisHybridManualElectronic	1	12.50 %
RegularEvaluationOftheMDARecordKeepingandInfoMangement	0	0.00 %
FilingSystemandCirculationisElectronic	0	0.00 %

Table 2: Information Management & Policies Pointers

As Table 2 shows, filing and circulation is solely manual in all the ministries despite having computers in all offices. Only three Ministries reported having annual budgets for record and information management, but none regularly evaluate their record keeping and information management because of the absence of a policy.

Infrastructure & IT Support

Formulating an ITC strategy, although the most cardinal aspect of e-government, is docked with complexity in Nigeria. The challenges mainly emanate from lack of adequate funding, dearth of expertise, glaring obsolescence and legacy systems residing in various ministries. There is no doubt as Table 3 shows, that all ministries are equipped with computers and have ICT departments or units, but the computers are not used beyond internet sharing and word-processing as the pointers of ICT mandates, records management and intranet sharing of information and resources in Table 3 show. The best practice of a holistic strategy for all MDAs may slowly resolve the challenges if funding and training are guaranteed. The Federal Government using such an approach established the Galaxy Backbone (2006), ‘to help reduce and completely eradicate the silos that had been in existent in government as a result of the diverse and expensive manner in which technology operations were delivered across the Ministries, Departments and Agencies. We were also charged with the responsibility of building a common services platform consisting of in-country and offshore VSAT hubs, a

datacenter, a Federal Capital metro fiber backbone and multiple redundant internet gateways’

Infrastructure_ITSupport	Frequency	Percent
TheMDAHaveComputersinOffices	8	100.00 %
MDAhasICTDepartmentUnit	8	100.00 %
DoesMDASustainPowerSupply	4	50.00 %
ComputersAreNetworkedLAN	4	50.00 %
ICTDepartmentUnitHasaMandateTarget	4	50.00 %
CentralSystemsForStorageorClassificationofRecords	4	50.00 %
FilesandResourcesSharedOnINTRANET	2	25.00 %
MDAHaveEDRM	2	25.00 %

Table 3: Infrastructure & IT Support Pointers

From the above table, it is apparent that after more than a decade, not more than half of the surveyed ministries have local area networks for inter-departmental collaborations and integration of services on a digital platform. However several ministries that share monolithic secretariats and other unusually segmented buildings complained about the challenge of networking their computers, but in general the study could not find the evidence that IT departments or units are empowered to influence record keeping, information flow, or any automation of civil service procedures on an intranet platform. Even the two ministries, who indicated the presence of EDRM, are either under development or not deployed. Another crucial infrastructure dimension is sustainable power supply, of which barely half of the surveyed ministries reported having backup power supplies mostly consisting of inverters, UPS and standby generators.

Personnel

Although skilled personnel and innovative approach to e-government and information management is highly crucial to e-government implementation, it remains a drawback, and an area where all the ministries score unimpressively (Table 4). While most of the officials claim their ministries have qualified personnel, the fact that less than half of the staff have attended trainings specifically for e-government and record keeping belie the sufficiency of their competence. This is further validated by the fact that only half of the ministries have appointed officers specifically for information and record keeping. Similarly, although the implementing ministry (Ministry of Communications) has specified Chief Technology Officer as a requirement for implementing e-government, only two ministries appointed a director and another cadre as acting chief technology officers. According to the Ministry of Communication, the Chief Technology Officer will be responsible for planning, coordinating, external linking and budgeting for the e-government project.

Personnel	Frequency	Percent
MDAhaveQualifiedInformationManagementStaff	6	75.00 %
TrainingsSpecificallyForRecordandDataManagement	4	50.00 %
AssigningManagingRecordsandInfoToSpecificManagersandStaff	4	50.00 %
MDAhasaChiefTechnologyOfficer	2	25.00 %

Table 4: Personnel & Training Pointers

In General the Ministries are doing poorly in assigning records and information management to specific staff. The Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) is purported to have trained 908 Nigerian civil servants in conjunction with the implementing Ministry of Communication. However no details of the type of trainings going on or any comprehensive manual exists on the ministry's website detailing a blue print for e-government in Nigeria or the nature of the joint venture with KOICA.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The framework and structure for e-government in Nigeria is still fluid and has no clear authority. During my open-ended interviews, I learned that the role of the Ministry of Communication as the implementing ministry was contended by the Ministry of Science and Technology, an issue still to be resolved by the executive. The fact that the recommended cadre of Chief Technology Officer is yet to be established in 80% of the ministries is a pointer to a lack of clear authority on who makes the decisions on the policies and technology of e-government in Nigeria. Recently news reports (OHCSF, 2018) said the Head of Civil Service of the Federation, after a retreat, is embarking on OHCSF 2017-2020 Policy Strategy and Implementation Plan, to revamp the civil service and repair its dented image. A number of reforms on which the plan is anchored on, are e-government related, e.g. performance management system tools, enterprise content management ECM system, civil service automation, and digitizing content. If this is an indication that the office of the Head of Civil Service will coordinate some aspects of e-government, then this ambivalence in the authority of e-government need to be eradicated or at least de-fragmented.

There appears to be a notorious persistence of a dichotomy between strategic plans and abject reality in e-government, resulting into a realm of sufficient information about MDA structures and plans but no interactive windows for citizens to access them. Where such windows are formally organized for access, like voter registration, license and passport renewal and SIM Card registration, etc, a huge crowd gathers for a frustrating day of failed internet connections and repeated data capture.

While it is best practice to congregate services by government on a single website for 'ease of doing business', especially for attracting foreign investors, concerned ministries should provide links on their individual websites to such services for internal clients. Currently the Ministry of Trade and Investments host crucial services like business registration, custom and excise, passport application etc. for potential investors coming to Nigeria.

There is the need also to collate various plans and pronouncements into coherent policies on ICT in relation to information management, e-government and FOI. For a start, all ministries need to have stand-alone ICT departments headed by the stipulated Chief Technology Officer who will be fully conversant with national plans and policies on information management

and e-government. Budgets should be prepared by the chief technology officer to reflect national policies. Currently most ministries don't have stand-alone departments, but units under different types of department, e.g records & statistics. Similarly most ICT budgets in ministries revolve around repeated inventories on items like printers, scanners, PCs, toners, ISP fees, UPS, and other discrete hardware and consumable, a total of which hardly reflect a plan or policy.

If a single e-government implementing authority is achieved, it should articulate a detail plan for e-government, information management, proposed automations, EDM systems and other tools and software, hardware, and details of training plans based on assessment of needs. Currently such a detail plan is lacking or hidden from the public view especially the so-called Open Government Partnership (OGP) and the Country Plan and Technology Roadmap, supposedly created with the help of the World Bank in conjunction with the Korean Trust Fund. Such a detail plan may address the fragmented government plans floating and lurking in various MDAs in addition to the ceaseless executive pronouncements in that sector. For instance, the planned harmonization of biometric data need to be hasten to avoid the persistent recapture of personal data by various MDAs like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC), Banks and Immigration services.

Finally, one of the imperatives that might hinder the full implementation of e-government in Nigeria is the issue of internet connection. Although a number of cables have landed at the Atlantic coast, evacuating the broadband advantage across the nation is proving difficult mainly due to the 'last mile conundrum'. As Oboyerulu et al (2017) point out, 99% of internet connections in Nigeria are wireless, resulting into peak period congestions especially in cities. As a result, vital national exercises like voter registration, passport and driving license capture, etc. have turned into daily nightmares. It is imperative for the government to ensure that such exercises have dedicated bandwidths using fiber optic connections as much as possible.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the following officers assigned in their various ministries to help the study: Abubakar Ladan Abdullahi, Deputy Director Ministry of Communications; Mr. Itodo John E., Chief Agric Research Officer, Ministry of Agriculture; Taiwo Adegbite, Assistant Chief Program Analyst, Ministry of Health; Mrs. Ameh, R.E, Chief Secretarial Assistant, Ministry of Education; Joseph Uka, Chief Statistical Officer, Ministry of Works, Power & Housing; Mrs Aderemi Yemi, Program Analyst 1, Ministry of Justice; Mrs Jokotola Akoni, Director Archives, Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA); Mr. Dike O.O, Assistant Director Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Investments.

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e-Readiness Survey of Selected Nigerian Federal Ministries

Name of Ministry

eServices (Internet Intranet)

Does the MDA have a Website

MDA Posted Non-sensitive Government Datasets Online

Does The Website Have Online Services or Transactions

Does the Website Provide Searchable Data for Inquiries and Research

Does The Website have Links to Other Ministries and Parastatals

Does the MDA Provide Access to Shared Documents Within Using Computers?

Have MDA Received Request For Information From Outside in the Past 2 Years?

Management And Policies

The MDA is aware of Freedom of Information Act 2014

The MDA has formally organized for FOI Act implementation

Filing System and Circulation is Manual

Filing System and Circulation is Electronic

Filing System and Circulation is Hybrid (Manual Electronic)

The MDA Have a Basic Records and Information Management Policy

Records Are Frequently Lost or 'Misplaced'

Records and Information are Managed on Each Dept Computer

The Introduction of ICT Has Changed MDA Record Keeping and Management

Is There An Annual Budget For Record and Information Management?

Regular Official Evaluation Of the MDA Record Keeping and Info Management?

Infrastructure IT Support

Does the MDA Have Central Systems For Storage or Classification of Records?

Does the MDA Have Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRM)

MDA has ICT Department/Unit

ICT Department/Unit Has a Mandate/Target

The MDA Have Computers in Offices

Computers Are Networked (LAN)

Files and Resources Shared On The Network (INTRANET)

Does MDA Sustain Power Supply?

Personnel

Assigning Managing Records and Info to Specific Managers and Staff

Chief Technology Officer responsible for Planning, Coordinating, and Budgeting

Does MDA have Qualified Information Management Staff?

Were There Trainings Specifically For Record and Data Management?