

Assessing the Role of E-Governance in Enhancing Citizens' Participation in Rice Farm Development in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria

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[0209] Abstract

The study examines the relationship between E-governance and citizens participation in Rice farm development in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Specific area such as how e-governance relate with citizens access to government distribution of improved seedlings, fertilizer distribution initiative and modern farming equipment support programme were all covered. The study adopted the survey research design. The population of the study comprised of the entire rice farmers in Abi Local Government Area. Stratified, quota and accidental sampling techniques were used to extract a simple size of three hundred and fifty (350) respondents across the ten political wards of the local government. Data generated for the study was analyzed using the Pearson product correlation technique. The findings of the study revealed that e-governance has significantly enhanced farmers access to information on government rice farming development programmes such as distribution of improved rice seedlings, access to fertilizer and modern rice farming equipment support programme which has improved rice production in the area. It was therefore recommended that government should prioritize the development of users-friendly digital interfaces to ensure easy accessibility and inclusivity of rural dwellers that may be facing challenges of strong, internet access. Government should create e-platform for farmers registration where electronic identification number will be issued to all farmers to access the various agricultural development support programme to eliminate diversion by public officials. Rigorous bureaucratic process in accessing the agriculture e-wallet and mechanization should be minimized to accommodate illiterate farmers that will want to access them.

Keyword: Citizens Participation, E-governance, Fertilizer distribution, Rice Farm Development.

Introduction

E-governance is a concept and practice that promote interactions between a government and its citizens using information and communication technology. It could also be seen as the use of computers and internet by the government, its agencies, departments and various units to provide the desired services to her citizens. According to Heeks (2003), e-government goes beyond providing services to the citizens and establishing communication with various stakeholders, but also include cordial relationship among all functions of government, citizens, private institutions and external bodies to achieve predetermined objectives. Akinola (2017) asserted that the use of information and communication technologies by government has transformed the relationship between the citizens, business organizations and international bodies. However, the adoption of ICT goes beyond the provision of services to the citizens but also a means through which government can inform her citizens about the activities of government and programmes through transparency and accountability.

E-governance take three different forms, which include: government to government, government to citizens and government to businesses. These provides platform for government to interact with various stakeholders for effective communication and service delivery. The government to citizens forms of e-governance is aimed at providing electronic platforms where the government

interact with citizens and also to keep the citizens abreast on the performance and programme of government which also includes accountability and transparency. Nigeria is the most populated African country with consistent growth in population desirous of government services. This placed the country on the imperative of effective discharge of public service to meet the diverse needs of its citizens due to inability of citizens to be on the known about government activities and programmes. To improve citizens participation in government activities and programs, the federal government of Nigeria, has embraced the global trend where technologies are harnessed to enhance the efficiency, transparency, and accessibility of government functions, Abdullahi (2024).

Agboola and Awodele (2019), also asserted that e-governance in Nigeria holds the promise of streamlining bureaucratic processes, reducing corruption and fostering greater citizen participation in governance. This is because the integration of information and communication technology in governance even though with some challenges has close the gap between citizens and their government in terms of interaction and accessibility. Furthermore, Oluwatayo and Adeniran (2017) argued that the introduction of e-governance in Nigeria has gone beyond just to deliver services to citizens to include a wider concept of citizen e-participation. This has aided citizen participation in public policy making process and decision making.

Statement of Problem

Nigeria operates a democratic system of government, a form of government that offers citizens the privileges to actively get involved in knowing how they are being governed and also contribute to issues that affect them directly. Moreover, the transition of modern government from police state to welfare state has placed the burden of the provision of some essential services and responsibilities to citizens on the shoulder of government. In this vein, the federal, state and local government in Nigeria over the years have been mapping out programmes in the education, health, agriculture, transportation and other sectors of the country's economy aimed at improving citizens welfare and the development of the country's economy. This effort of the various levels of government seems not to yield the expected result due to a disconnection between government and citizens in terms of communication and interaction among various stakeholders.

In the agricultural sector, the various level of government has initiated different agricultural development programmes aimed at empowering farmers to boost food production and food security across the country. These agricultural development interventions include the provision of fertilizer, distribution of improved rice seedlings, provision of modern farm implement and equipment to enhance rice, cassava, millet, yam and beans production and also to train farmers on modern farming methods. But farmers participation and access to these programmes have been limited due to poor communication channel to get them involved. Abi Local Government Area is one of the local government areas in Cross River State with vast and rich swam land for rice production. The people of the area have been in decades of rice farming as major producer of rice covering Cross River and south-Eastern states. It is therefore, expected that with the various agricultural intervention programmes of government particularly in the area of rice farm development, farmers in the area should increase their sizes of rice farm, cultivate improved rice grains, use modern equipment and practices in rice farming, have access to government fertilizer initiative to boost production and improvement from what has been as regards rice production in the area. But the reverse has been the case because farmers in the local government still uses outdated farming methods, old rice seedling, inability to access and apply fertilizers on the farm, and the use of cruel farm implements despite government effort in providing them. The reason is that the rural farmers sometimes are not always aware of these interventions by the government due to poor access to information which always affect their participation to benefit from it.

Furthermore, due to the rural nature of the local government, agricultural extension officers that interface farmers for training and information do not have road access to some farmers in rural difficult terrains which always deny the farmers the opportunity to benefit and participate in these programmes.

In a bid to get citizens properly involved and participate in government agricultural programmes to improve rice production, government at different level have embraced e-governance by introducing electronic information system such as WhatsApp, Facebook, telegram and various e-information database to get farmers fully informed and participation on government programmes. The question therefore is: Has the introduction of e-governance enhanced citizens participation in accessing improved rice seedlings? Has e-governance enhanced citizens information to access government rice fertilizer Initiative. This paper aims to explore the relationship between e-governance and citizens participation in rice farm development in Aba Local Government Area, Cross River State.

Objectives of the study

The broad objective of the study is to examine the relationship between e-governance and citizens participation in rice farm development in Abi Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to: (a) Investigate the relationship between E-governance and citizens access to government improved rice seedlings in Abi Local Government Area. (b) Ascertain the relationship between e-governance and farmers access to government fertilizer distribution initiation in Abi Local Government Area. (c) Examine the relationship between E-governance and farmers access to government modern farming equipment support programmes in Abi Local Government Area.

Research hypothesis

The following null hypotheses were raised to guide the study: (a) There is no significant relationship between E-governance and citizens access to government improved rice seedlings in Abi Local Government Area. (b) There is no significant relationship between E-governance and farmers access to government fertilizer distribution initiative in Abi Local Government Area. (c) The introduction of E-governance tends not to significantly relate with farmers access to government modern farming equipment support programme in Abi Local Government Area.

Conceptualizing E-governance: The word E-governance is an innovative and transformative shift that adopt Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to improve the efficiency, participation and accessibility of government programmes and services. The evolution of E-governance signaled a shift in the manner government interact with citizens, businesses, and every other stakeholder in service delivery. Adeyemi (2017) sees e-governance as a construct that establishes interactions between the government and citizens of a country. He went further to state that e-governance involved the use of electronic devices by the government and its agencies functioning under parameter of government to provide the needed services to the citizens. In his opinion, Fatile (2012) sees e-governance as the process of using information and communication technology by the government to transform the relationship between citizens, business organizations and international bodies. According to Said (2011), e-governance means using technology to get citizens actively participate and derive support from the government. In his view, this will facilitate bottom – up ideas to influence the state political agenda. In this case, citizens are seen as producers of policies rather than just consumers in the previous order.

E-governance and Citizens Participation in Rice Farm Development: Before the discovery of oil in the 1960s, the agricultural industry in Nigeria was a very wide industry covering rice production, yam, cassava, fishing among other crop and livestock rearing (Signal Alliance, 2012). Agriculture then, has the mainstay of the country's economy before its neglect after the discovery of oil. It is estimate that Nigeria now imports about N356 billion value of rice annually to meet the consumption rate of its citizens. These imported goods which are very expensive and economically tasking on Nigerians, reduces possible employment opportunities in the agricultural sector and diminishes the value of the country's foreign exchange (Ajayi, 2023).

According to FEPSAN (2012), the federal government effort to drive agricultural development to boost local food production especially rice production, have led to the formation of several initiative

aimed at involving citizens participation. These initiatives are driven through E-governance to get rural citizens to fully participate and take advantage of various support programmes since there are the major drivers of rice production. Motilewa, Worlu, Adepoju and Fayomi (2015) in their study on e-governance and agricultural development opines that through e-governance, the Growth Enhancement Scheme (GESS) a product of the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) of the federal government has improved local rice production since July, 2012 due to the use of E-governance to get citizens widely participated and access to improved rice seedlings, fertilizer and training on new rice farming methods. They asserted that in the past years, federal and state government rice fertilizers and seeds procurement and distribution were highly disputed by secrecy, lack of accessibility and fraudulently huddled away from intended beneficiaries. Thus, the expected results of the initiatives could not be achieved.

Onwudinto (2012) in his study, discovered that since the introduction of e-governance by the growth enhancement scheme (GESS), Nigerian rural farmers now have the opportunity to receive direct funding and assistance from the government through the use of farmers electronic wallets. The study was further supported by KPMG-quarterly report (2014) which revealed that over the years, many farmers in Nigeria were embittered of their access to rice development support fund of the federal government due to lack of efficient transfer methodology, bureaucracy and lack of transparency especially in local government areas that embezzled these funds and huddled their accessibility and participation. The report further concluded that the electronic growth enhancement scheme (GESS) by the federal ministry of Agriculture have helped to reduce bureaucracy and engaged citizens in a user-centered manner thereby offering these farmers with the necessary resources required to growth their crops which leads to the development of the country's agro-sector particularly rice production.

Impediments and Challenges of Adopting E-governance in Nigeria: The advent and application of electronic governance popularly known as E-governance was aimed at enhancing efficiency and effectiveness of government operation and service delivery to the citizenry. It also aimed to expand citizens participation and involvement in public policy making, accountability and accessibility of government programmes using the electronic system. However, the introduction of e-governance despite its enormous benefits, faces various forms of challenge. This study explored the various impediments to e-governance drawing insights from various scholars view in the field.

One of the impediments to the adoption of e-governance in Nigeria is the disparity between rural and urban dwellers in accessing digital and internet facilities. Abubaker (2018) revealed that there is high level of disparity in access to internet infrastructure and service between urban and rural dwellers in the country. These inadequacies are noticed in the areas of lack of reliable internet connectivity, poor digital literacy among rural dwellers, insufficient use of government e-governance tool among others. These limitations made it difficult for rural citizens to effectively participate and access government activities online. Also, inadequate cybersecurity infrastructure for online database against threats have also inculcate fear on citizens in using internet platforms in transaction mostly when it deals with finances. The fear of vulnerability and integrity of sensitive government database has eroded public trust in e-governance (Adesina, 2017).

Furthermore, previous studies by Chen (2021), Anderson (2020), Li (2022) revealed that despite the challenges and the impediment of adopting e-governance in Nigeria, the advent of electronic governance has enhanced citizens active participation in ensuring governance accessibility, accountability, quick and wider information dispensation to citizens. They highlighted that e-governance has enabled citizens to voice their opinions, and engaged with government initiatives through online and internet engagements and feedback mechanism.

Theoretical Framework (modernization theory)

The study was anchored on the tenets of the modernization theory which was developed by Rostow, Parsons and David Milliards. These scholars, were active particularly between the late-1950s and 1960s

in developing the theory. The theory proposes a movement from “traditional” society to “modern” society through several evolution stages basically influenced by science and technology. The basic assumption of the modernization theory is that organizations and societies who are willing to develop and achieve improved productivity should transit from the application and adoption of traditional approaches in performing task and embrace science and technology which is more result oriented.

The theory is suitable in explaining this study because of the growing desire of Nigerian citizens to have a platform that will give them access to actively participate in public decision making, accessibility of government intervention programmes and effective information and communication channels through the use of various technological media platform against the old order of physical contact information dissemination. By the assumption of the theory, if government embrace modernized information channel using the internet platforms to reach out to citizens, there is every tendency that rice farmers will adequately and promptly be aware of the various government agricultural intervention programmes which will ensure their participation in benefiting from them and stimulate rice farm development in the country. The theory is relevant to this study because it explained and predict the outcome of using information and communication technology in reaching out to a wide-range of farmers across the urban and rural areas against the use of agricultural extension officers.

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research approach to investigate the relationship between e-governance and citizens participation in rice farm development in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. The survey research design was adopted to allow the use of questionnaire to sample the opinion of respondents which were basically rice farmers in the study area. Stratified, quota, purposive and accidental sampling techniques were used to arrive at a sample size of three hundred and fifty (350) respondents across the ten (10) political wards of Abi Local Government Area. A total of 350 structured questionnaire in four points Likert scale were produced and distributed to 35 respondents per each of the 10 political wards of Abi. Out of the 350 questionnaires distributed, 327 were correctly filled and returned to the researcher, while 23 were either not correctly filled or not returned. Primary data generated in the study was analyzed using the Pearson product moment correction (PPMC) statistical technique to examine the relationship among the investigated variables.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between E-governance and citizens access to improved rice seedlings in Abi Local Government Area.

TABLE 4.21: PEARSON PRODUCT MOMENT CORRELATION ANALYSIS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTRODUCTION OF E-GOVERNANCE AND CITIZENS ACCESS TO IMPROVED RICE SEEDLINGS (N = 327)

Variable	$\sum x$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal
	$\sum y$	$\sum y^2$		
Introduction of E-governance	538	1063	16128	.646*
Citizens access to improved rice seedlings	9387	27559		

df = 325, level of significance = 0.05, critical r – value = .113

At 325 degree of freedom and .05 level of significant, the critical r-value is .113 and the obtained or calculated r-value is .646.

Decision rule: Since the calculated r-value of .646 is greater than the critical r-value of .113, we rejected the null hypothesis which states that introduction of E-governance has not significantly enhanced citizens access to improved rice seedlings and accept the alternate hypothesis that is statistically

significant which states that introduction of E-governance has significantly enhanced citizens access to improved rice seedlings in Abi Local Government Area.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant relationship between E-governance and farmers access to government fertilizer distribution initiative

TABLE 4.22: PEARSON PRODUCT MOMENT CORRELATION ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN E-GOVERNANCE AND FARMERS ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT FERTILIZER DISTRIBUTION INITIATIVE (N = 327)

Variable	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal
The introduction of E-governance	601	1313	18146	.790*
Farmers access to government Fertilizer distribution initiative	9387	27559		

df = 325, level of significance = 0.05, critical r – value = .113

At 325 degree of freedom and .05 level of significant, the critical r-value is .113 and the obtained and the calculated r-value is .790.

Decision rule: Since the calculated r-value of .790 is greater than the critical r-value of .113, the null hypothesis which states that the introduction of E-governance has not significantly enhanced farmers access to government fertilizer distribution initiative was rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted which state that the introduction of E-governance has significantly enhanced farmers access to government fertilizer distribution initiative in Abi Local Government Area.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant relationship between E-governance and farmers access to government modern farming equipment support programmes.

TABLE 4.23: PEARSON PRODUCT MOMENT CORRELATION ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTRODUCTION OF E-GOVERNANCE AND FARMERS ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT MODERN FARMING EQUIPMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME (N = 327)

Variable	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal
Introduction of E-governance	2804	2499	81836	.557*
Farmers access to government modern Equipment support programme	9387	27559		

df = 325, level of significance = 0.05, critical r – value = .113

At 325 degree of freedom and .05 level of significant, the critical r-value is .113 and the obtained or calculated r-value is .557.

Decision rule: Since the calculated r-value of .557 is greater than the critical r-value of .113, we b rejected the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between the introduction of E-governance and farmers access to government modern farming equipment support programme and accept the alternate hypothesis that is statistically significant which states that the introduction of E-governance significantly relate with farmers access to government modern farming equipment support programme.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study revealed a significant relationship between E-governance and citizens participant in rice farm development, particularly in Abi local government area of Cross River state.

In the first hypothesis, which enquired e-governance and citizens access to government improved rice seedling distribution programme, the result of the analysis revealed that there is a significant relationship between the adoption of electric governance and farmers access to improved rice seedlings programme aimed at enhancing rice production. The finding implies that rural rice

farmers in the study area who were previously not aware of agricultural development programmes of the government due to poor access to information to actively participate and benefit from those agricultural support programme occasioned by information and communication gap between government and citizens, now have access to this information at their door step due to the introduction of e-governance. with this development, rice farmers across rural communities are now always on the known and have participated and benefit from government improved rice seedlings distribution programme which has increased rice productivity in the area. The findings of the study align with Wang (2021) who argued that electronic platforms enable timely updates on government policies, activities, budgets and programmes, empowering citizens with the knowledge to bold their representative accountable. Furthermore, the finding also echoed (Chen, 2022) argument that electronic governance provides citizens with access to government dataset, fostering a culture of transparency and trust between the government and its citizens.

In the second hypothesis, the study exposes a significant relationship between electronic governance and farmers access to information on government fertilizer distribution initiative to farmers. The result of the analysis revealed that since the advent of e-governance, rural farmers now have timely information on government effort to distribute fertilizer to farmers aimed at improving rice yield to boost productivity. This implies that rural farmers who were initially not able to access and benefit from the government fertilizer initiative are now timely and properly informed using various electronic platforms. Farmers no longer need to travel to a long distant before applying to benefit from these support programmes of government as they now participate from the comfort of their homes.

The findings align with Jones (2020) assertion that e-governance platforms always provide user-friendly interface, making it much easier for individuals with varying levels of digital literacy to access government websites and applications. The findings also re-emphasized Smith (2019) argument that the digitization of governance and public services aids citizens to access information and complete transactions from the comfort of their homes. This eliminates the need for physical contact which makes it easy for citizen to participate fully irrespective of their distance from governance offices. The findings suggest the distribution of fertilizers to farmers by the various levels of government have now witnessed wider farmers participation and benefits as a result of e-governance platforms. This has also boost rice production in the study area.

The result of the study also revealed a significant relationship between e-governance and farmers participation in benefiting from the government modern farming equipment support programme. It was discovered that due to the creation of various electronic database and platforms, farmers now have direct access of applying for government modern firm equipment drive to enhance large scale farming. This application is now done at the comfort of their homes and all transaction carried out online without physical presence. The implication of the finding is that several farmers in rural communities who have access to using modern equipment to farm has increased their farm sizes and productivity. The findings align with the analysis of Adebayo (2023) who noted that e-governance initiative have not only improved transparency in governance but also, reduced bureaucratic rep-tapism in governance prolonged processes. The findings echo John (2020) argument that electronic governance has provided mobile application platforms which are instrumental in enhancing service delivery, information dissemination, and engaging citizens in real-time. The findings also bring to light how farmers have actively participated in shaping some government agricultural programmes and policies through e-participation platforms that have bettered the agricultural sector.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The investigation of e-governance and citizens participation in rice farm development in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State has exposed key findings that underscores the present order of electronic governance in Nigeria and its implication in rice farm development. The study has re-

emphasized the already growing significance of the introduction of modern science and technology in advancing the relationship between government and their citizens in-service delivery. One of the major discoveries in this study is the increasing application and use of improved grains and equipment such as hand tractors in rural communities which has improved rice production locally. There is also a rising trend in the use of digitalized platforms by citizens in accessing government programmes and services indicating a shift from traditional approaches and practices to a more technological driven farming practice.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made: (a) In the e-governance initiative, government should prioritize the development of user- friendly digital interfaces to ensure easy accessibility and inclusivity of rural dwellers that may be facing challenges of strong, internet access. (b) Government should create e-platform for farmers registration where electronic identification will be issued to all farmers to access the various agricultural development support programme to eliminate diversion by public officials. (c) Rigorous bureaucratic process in accessing the agriculture e-wallet and mechanization should be minimized to accommodate illiterate farmers that will want to access them. (d) Even with the effectiveness of e-governance in modern state, the government should conduct an online training of resource persons in each community whenever there is an improved seedling to enable adapt with the technique of farming them.

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