

Africa is home to 500 million people without an identity. That denies them easy access to basic services such as health care and voting. With the help of a UN-sponsored initiative, many African countries are now starting to change this

EVERY CITIZEN'S RIGHT

According to the World Bank Group's 2018 #ID4D Global Dataset, an estimated one billion people don't have identities. This excludes them from society as without a secure and reliable way of proving one's identity, a person may be unable to exercise the range of rights defined by national laws. It is very likely that a lack of identification will also make it difficult to open a bank account, vote, obtain formal employment, and get access to education or health care. This inability to exercise one's rights can lead to political instability at home or abroad if migrants have no documentation.

To counter these issues, governments, global organizations and companies have made progress when it comes to introducing widespread digital ID systems and Africa could lead the way. This may be surprising as half of the continent's population – i.e. 500 million people – do not possess an official ID. In addition, those who do hold documents sometimes only have paper identities, which are often not centrally registered and therefore are hard to verify.

This is why it is particularly urgent to act, says Dr Joseph Atick, Executive Chairman at ID4Africa – a United Nations-sponsored initiative founded in 2014 to deliver secure identities for all African citizens.

"It's very serious when someone cannot prove who they are because they then don't have access to services such as health care, they can't travel as they don't have a passport, they can't put their children in school or participate in society," says Dr Atick. Being registered as a citizen is also crucial to exercise one's human and civic rights, he adds. "Without an identity, people are marginalized and society chaotic."

And that's not all. "When a population feels excluded, it will resort to behaving in ways that are not consistent with the law," says Dr Atick. "In this context, people build their own governance, their own access to services. It's a breakdown of the state."

Communities in African border regions are most affected by the lack of identity and exclusion. Colonial powers drew borders through tribal communities' lands, splitting them between two or more countries. The governments of these countries were then – and still are – reluctant to recognize the members of other tribes that now live on their territory.

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BEYOND BORDERS

The effects of such exclusion are felt beyond Africa. "When nothing functions, it creates bitterness and pushes people to leave," Dr Atick claims. "They cross borders and seas in the hope of finding a country where they can access society."





But even abroad, a lack of digital identity causes problems – for the migrating individuals and for the countries taking them in. “It’s a big challenge. Often, there’s no way of telling where people arriving at the border are from,” says Dr Atick. “If high-coverage identity systems existed for the majority of African countries, it would help in determining who, among those arriving in Europe, could be eligible for asylum and who should be repatriated to their country of origin.”

That’s why organizations such as the UN High Commission for Refugees and the European border and coast guard agency Frontex see digital IDs as an important solution to address such a crisis. Integrating biometrics into the enrolment process makes identifying people more secure as images of people’s irises or fingerprints can easily be sent back to their countries of origin for identification.

Dr Atick thinks identity systems should be based on so-called foundational identities. These are ►

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DR JOSEPH ATICK, EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN, ID4AFRICA

► centralized, unique identities from which every other identification – electronic health cards, for example – can be derived. The use of highly-advanced digital technologies makes it possible to build national population registers and provide proof of valid identities for all types of verification and uses. That would also make it easier to take the continent – and countries lacking secure identities in other parts of the world – into the digital age.

“The name of the game now is inclusion and the gate to inclusion is identity,” Dr Atick says. “Otherwise, we will have a society that in the next 10 to 20 years will have a big divide – the digital divide. Those who have access and those who do not. In today’s world, this divide is starting to materialize.”

DIGITAL IDS IN ACTION

However, only South Africa has so far implemented a comprehensive digital ID system. Other African countries are following in its footsteps, often starting by introducing partial systems. They are frequently supported by ID4Africa, which is co-operating with their governments and private companies that provide digital ID systems, such as Gemalto.

Gabon in central Africa is one example. It initiated a voter biometrics programme in 2012, which has been followed by a modern and biometric national registry. The country’s aim is to introduce a digital register of births, marriages and deaths, and issue digitally registered national ID cards for all. The government hopes the new system will improve public governance and help Gabon achieve its target of becoming an emerging country within one generation. The country has already quadrupled its growth rate to 5% since 2009.

Gabon’s Interior Minister, Lambert-Noel Matha, said at a recent conference that for its policies to be effective, the government needed its national statistics to be accurate and that wasn’t the case under the old system.

“Managing our old register of births, marriages and deaths is very difficult. The paper documents are in a bad state, the data collected aren’t registered or transferred for a lack of infrastructure. A lot of births aren’t officially declared as many people don’t have any ID. Plus, the authenticity of birth certificates is often disputed as the number of forgeries is on the rise,” he claimed.

Another condition for sustained economic growth is stability – especially during electoral periods, which have sometimes been moments of tension and violence in Gabon. It is hoped that the country’s digital electoral register will make Gabon’s elections more credible and transparent, and weaken the case for allegations of electoral fraud.

“Our biometrical census has shown that there are 578,832 eligible voters and not 604,833, as initially thought. The new system has helped us find more than 26,000 duplications,” Minister Matha said. The system was deployed over the past few years in local, presidential and legislative elections.

Dr Atick agrees that digital ID systems can be crucial to maintaining peace at election times.



There are bumps in the road on the way to a functioning digital identity system, for structural, financial and societal reasons

He cites two opposing examples: Rwanda and Nigeria. “In Rwanda, digital identities exist and allow citizens to easily participate in society and elections. There’s no exclusion and electoral registers are never contested. That’s also one of the main reasons why there are so few Rwandan migrants in the world – they feel included and are happy to stay in their country.

“Nigeria, by contrast, hasn’t yet finished introducing a digital register. The country is now going through a registration exercise for the general elections in 2019. The international community is very anxious to make sure the register is not contested.”

Nigeria’s last presidential and parliamentary vote in 2015 saw protests over claims of massive fraud and calls for the result to be cancelled. The country’s National Human Rights Commission says nearly 100 people were killed in the run-up to the elections and also flagged hundreds of acts of violence. At the time of writing, fears are already growing about a rise in political violence, especially as this February’s elections are expected to be a close run.

Digital identities can also make countries function more smoothly in other ways. Cameroon is also introducing a digital system based on biometrics for the police. They can check someone’s criminal records using their fingerprints if that person has the most recent edition of the national ID card. Elsewhere, Uganda has overhauled its visa system, which means applications are now completed and delivered online. The government says that this is already stimulating tourism and other economic sectors. Cameroon and Uganda have sealed a deal with Gemalto for their digital ID systems.

BUMPS IN THE ROAD

However, there are some bumps in the road on the way to a functioning digital identity system, for structural, financial and societal reasons.

“In Africa, the minute somebody is technically competent, the private sector recruits them. The global community needs to help Africa build capacity – there are not enough technical people to help design, support, maintain, or deploy these systems,” Dr Atick says.

“Second, we find a lack of political awareness on the part of the leadership. Often, politicians in Africa only think of digital identity systems as an argument to win the elections. Also, citizens need to be educated about these new ID schemes and it is



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important politicians make clear the system will not be used to oppress them.”

ID4Africa is calling for a solid legal framework that ensures privacy and data protection, and for new digital systems be overseen by an independent commission governed by the people.

The third challenge is the continent’s often arid conditions, but Dr Atick says they can also be seen as an opportunity. “Africa is a laboratory for the world when it comes to robust, cost effective and innovative solutions. They must be very economical and withstand very harsh environments and a lack of infrastructure. That creates a new breed of solutions. Let’s call them Africa-proof.”

Technologies implemented in Africa might help other countries where many people also lack ID documents – countries such as Nepal or Bangladesh in Asia and certain parts of Latin America. And they might allow the UN to achieve its Sustainable Development Goal 16: to provide a legal form of ID for everyone in the world by 2030. Significant progress has been made. The number of people without a digital ID has fallen by 1.5 billion since 2000 and people like Dr Atick want to see that work continue. ■

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