

THE BENIN RECIPE AND CHALLENGES FOR ELECTRONIC AND BIOMETRIC IDENTIFICATION DATA CAPTURE

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There is no more discussion on the fact that, in the era of data, the digital identification of our population is not an optional tool for development. While sometimes European countries may have an issue with having biometric data on the population centralised and managed by government, in Africa, I believe the threat of non-development is much larger than the fear of “big Brother”. Accepting this premise implies that we need to embrace digital identification of the population, giving each and every citizen a unique identifier. Let’s drive a process to get there and let’s accept that some mistake may be done along the process, but we are all in this discovery process and there is no great innovation without overcoming some mistakes and challenges including the challenge of protecting the data and the systems against potential abuse.

Benin has committed itself to the path of using a Unique Personal Identifier (UPI) to drive the country’s ambitious government development program. The following is a brief overview of the path already taken along with some of the challenges that we faced.

The overall process of developing the eID system in a country can be described in 4 phases: 1) Preparation 2) Building of the initial eID database 3) On-going data capture and update of the database and 4) Exploitation and monetisation of eID. In Benin we are currently implementing phases 3 and 4, so the lessons learned so far are primarily on phases 1 and 2.



The Beninese 5-point recipe for phase 1 is:

- **Ensure strong leadership for the program:**
The leadership of the program should be at the highest level, as moving along this path will require strategic decisions and out of the box thinking. It is obvious that the far-reaching implications of eID will impact political processes such as elections or administrative divisions of the country. The head of state should lead the process. The program governance will have a political layer (ministers and members of parliament across all parties and political wings) and 1 or 2 project / operational layers, all properly coordinated.
- **Get an experienced Technical Partner to implement the process of building the initial database:**
This will insure that the process is not left only hands of public servants and will be driven with efficiency and will guarantee high data quality. This is an expensive ingredient. Be prepared.
- **Design the process with your Technical Partner, keeping in mind:**
Set clear objectives. The implementation must be countrywide and reach all groups within the entire population. The Technical provider will partner with your team across the country. This is how you start involving large number of people countrywide. The process has to be short and efficient.
- **Communicate profusely:**
The pre-launch communication campaign is key in terms of your promises to the population and your credibility regarding the benefits they can expect from such a process. Make it simple and practical. This is where the political layer of governance also plays a key role of getting the population to embrace the program as they will see there is no sided political gain, but only benefits for all. The communication campaign will start 1 month before phase 2 and will carry on for the duration of phase 2.

▪ **Last but not least: get the regulatory framework as an enabler to the eID program**

Using new technologies, eID requires new and appropriate legislative and regulatory framework to be designed and passed. These pieces of laws and regulations have to validate the process, the existence of the database itself and the use of the biometric data. It has several implications on existing regulations in the way the country handles people identity and civil status. A pinch of obligation is needed here (compulsory eID card for adult, compulsory registration for social grants recipients, etc.) although it does not work to make it an obligation to register.

Then, probably after 1 year or so you are ready for Phase 2 which is the field phase of registration, capturing and securely storing biometric data. The Beninese 6-point recipe for phase 2 is:

- **We have opted for fixed registration centres:**
600 approximately across the country for a period of 6 months. A minimum of 2 tablets per centre. 1500 tablets deployed + spares ones.
- **In each centre, in addition to the kit (tablet) operators, 2 key people are present:**
A form facilitator, assisting people to fill a form with their personal details; this form will help capture accurate data; this form includes a unique QR Code allowing tracking; and a municipal officer whose role is to manage the process of receiving those citizens coming to register with no birth certificate or ID papers.
- **Daily and weekly reports to the central supervision team**
- **Implement secured processes to upload citizen data records into the database.**
- **On-going field supervision by central team and monitoring by political governance authorities**
- **A decision should be made about how to go with registration of the diaspora:**
In Benin the decision was made to postpone registration of Diaspora to phase 3 i.e. on-going registration phase.

The details of phase two are clearly adapted to the constraints and the reality on the ground of Benin and it is where significant variations in the planning and execution can be expected from country to country. Nevertheless, the above represent general elements that can be a useful starting point for others.



Assuming you have the right recipe you still have numerous challenges that can derail your process and impact the expected results. Let me touch on a few of them here.

One thing is to set clear objectives and another is to stick to them. Requests and pressure will come from various sources to capture additional data in view of some application / usage that is foreseen. For example, should other parameters be captured and added to the biometric database such as blood type? professional activity? police record if any? If these parameters have not been planned to be captured by design, it is important not to deviate from the original narrow objective half way. And in order to be able to do so, heavy communication should take place explaining what an identification database is and what its role as a foundational stone for a lot of other activities and functionalities can be. It is important to emphasize that the foundational and functional data have to be kept and managed separately. Change management is key here as for any major nationwide project.

Then there is the challenge of no existing ID paper. In Benin, we took the option to register everyone, even those who came with no ID documents. And this was important as we counted as much as 20% of the total number of registered individuals did not have evidence of identity. A process was set to produce locally on the spot a document signed by 2 witnesses and a municipal officer. This document would have all the necessary basic information required to identify the person. Once the process is completed and verified, it was decided to provide new and electronic birth certificate to all those who did not have. A piece of law was passed to allow this exceptional process which “regularized” 2.5 million people. Printed birth certificates are in the process of being delivered to recipients and a database of electronic, dematerialized birth certificates was created.

These are salient points from the Benin journey to electronic ID, journey which we have started in 2017 and which is ongoing as we enter phase 3, and we expect will become the DNA of our development processes. We hope to extract lessons from phase 3 and 4 and to share them in the future for the benefit of the African identity community within the context of our engagements with the ID4Africa Movement.

