GUESS WHO? HOW DIGITAL ID IS CHANGING CIVIC SPACE

Digital ID: Policy Brief

This document will provide an overview for digital policy issues that concern digital identity. Skim this document before the workshop to get a better sense of the policy topics we will discuss. For additional context and information, we will share two resource lists at the end of the workshop.

Digital Identity: What Is It?

Researcher Elizabeth M. Renieris writes that digital identity is our identity-related data. In other words, it is just an accumulation of data points: while no single data point reveals too much about who we are, together they paint a pretty comprehensive picture of our lives, biases, preferences, etc.

As more data points are collected over time, our digital identities become proxies— expressions of our identities. This only becomes more true as the line between our "in real life" selves and our digital selves becomes more blurred. So much of our lives online impacts our "real" lives, and vice-versa, that every day our digital footprint is more likely to include identity-related or identity-revealing data. Moreover, digital ID credentials are rapidly becoming the norm, with most integrating biometric data (fingerprints, facial recognition, etc.) with digital identification for people to confirm their identity.

Digital ID: The Positives

In most societies today, identification—proof of one's identity—is essential for daily life. Basic transactions, from opening a bank account or enrolling in school, to applying for a job or voting in an election, require some form of identification. Though the types of IDs that are needed vary country-to-country, in general, birth certificates, national IDs, passports, and drivers' licenses, tend to be the most common. Furthermore, as access to the internet broadens and people, services, and transactions move online, a new generation of ID systems, providers, and technologies is emerging. This has created the opportunity for more secure and convenient in-person and remote transactions.

The World Bank estimates that 1 billion people worldwide do not have access to basic ID credentials. This number includes the 1 in 4 children whose births have never been registered and those whose IDs cannot be trusted because they are poor quality or are not reliably verified.

Most of these people live in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. They are typically among the poorest and most vulnerable groups in society. Moreover, according to the ID4D-Findex survey, one out of every two women in low income economies does not have a national ID or other form of identity verification. People with disabilities as well as people living in rural and remote areas face the greatest hurdles for obtaining official IDs. Makhtar Diop, World Bank Vice President for Infrastructure, notes: "IDs are taken for granted by those who have them. But lack identification creates barriers for each individual affected and for the countries they live in."

In addition to this 'invisible billion,' McKinsey Global Institute estimates that 3.4 billion people have some form of ID but have limited ability to use it in the digital world.

Given our society's reliance on identification, it is unsurprising that there are significant, real-world benefits to digital identification. Many organizations and governments have prioritized the development of digital ID, not to mention its coupling with biometrics and artificial intelligence, to attain a key development goal in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: to provide "legal identity for all" by 2030. Prioritization of identification has been prioritized because it is a key enabler of other SDG goals and targets, such as financial and economic inclusion, healthcare, education, child protection, good governance, and safe migration.

Brett Solomon, executive director of the NGO Access Now, writes that governments are keen to digitize identifications and other documents for their citizens to increase access to government services. In states facing mass migration and/or harboring large numbers of undocumented people—e.g. Jordan—digital IDs are a means of providing identification and other documents to facilitate their settlement, financial security, and job searches. In countries ravaged by war, internal political or ethnic conflict, or natural disasters, thousands are forced to flee their homes without their records or identifications. For their part, the private sector—particularly, banking, travel, and insurance industries—are eager to streamline processes for their products and services.

The World Bank notes that inclusive and trusted digital ID systems can strengthen the transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness of governance and the delivery of services and programs. It can also reduce fraud and leakage in government-to-person (G2P) transfers, facilitate new modes of service delivery, and increase overall administrative efficiency. In the private sector, being able to reliably and easily verify a client's identity is critical. Digital ID systems can reduce costs associated with regulatory compliance, widen customer bases,

generate new markets, and otherwise foster a business friendly environment. Lastly, digital authentication mechanisms can facilitate automated transactions, making them more secure and reliable, and ensuring that less information is required or is revealed in a transaction. The use of biometric authentication (e.g. fingerprints or facial recognition) can provide a convenient, password-free (and, therefore, more secure—at least, in theory) method of authentication.

A push is being made to build next-generation ID systems that are "good ID systems" or, in other words, that put people and their privacy at the center. The aim is to create technology and ID systems that are non-exclusionary, protect personal information, provide people with greater control over their data, and respond to the needs of population - not just the different needs of private and public sector institutions. The idea behind "good ID" is that increasing and guaranteeing the accuracy and integrity of data over time, as well as adapting open standards and interoperability, will result in the overall improvement of system utility, sustainability, and adaptability of technology as a whole.

To guide the development of "good ID", the World Bank and the Center for Global Development created 10 Principles on Identification for Sustainable Development in 2017.

Digital ID: The Negatives

While promoting the positives of digital ID, the World Bank acknowledges that this technology increases the risks associated with collecting and managing personal data. When databases are digitized, the risk of breaches (not to mention, the scale of them) and of identity theft are elevated.

Solomon ultimately argues that digital ID technology poses more risks to human rights than it does benefits.

Alongside privacy violations, the creation of digital IDs creates new barriers to access and inclusion. Certain populations—persons with disabilities, persons with worn fingerprints (elderly or manual workers etc.)—may have difficulty using or enrolling in ID systems that rely on certain types of biometrics.