Reorienting the Identity Management System in Nigeria

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Target 16.9 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is aimed at providing legal identity for all by 2030, including birth registration.[1] Progress towards achieving this target has many impediments. For example, the development and implementation of national policies on identification management and civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems remain challenged across countries in Africa.[2] Initially advocated as independent systems, the need for integration of CRVS and citizen identification in a digital world requires new perspectives and legal frameworks that are often unavailable.[3] Owing to its increasing importance, the United Nations Statistics Division in 2019 released guidelines for the development and integration of CRVS and identity management systems.[4] However, streamlining of established processes and institutions in countries can be a challenge as it might require scrapping or merging of institutions and inevitable job losses. This is the reality in Nigeria where the identity management agency and the civil registration management entity are under different ministries, each with its bureaucratic processes.

Why does Nigeria need an efficient identity management system?

In an evolving and increasingly digital world, the importance and ability to identify individuals physically or remotely cannot be overemphasized. An efficient identity management system is instrumental to eliminating fraud and crimes that can be associated with attribution. It is also important for security, especially tracking of criminals and for several other administrative processes.[5] Nigeria has been battling an armed insurgency in the Northeast of the country which is gradually becoming widespread. There are concerns that many of the insurgents are not Nigerians. However, with a poor identity management system, these claims are difficult to verify, as Nigeria has porous borders. Also, it is difficult to follow up on policies on rehabilitation and

release of insurgents if their identities cannot be duly tracked for easy identification of repeat criminals. Furthermore, the identity management system is necessary to measure the progress towards achievement of universal health coverage targets, one of the important health SDGs.[6]

When citizens are registered in the national identity database at birth and exited at death, the national identity database can serve as an important and complete data source on the population. A proper identity management system will help reduce the cost of governance in Nigeria as different government agencies have established parallel processes for the collection and verification of citizen information. These institutions have committed resources to developing systems and procuring hardware for collection of biometric data, thereby resulting in a waste of scarce resources. A cross section of institutions collecting biometric data and issuing unique identification to citizens in Nigeria include the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), Independent National Electoral Commission, the Federal Road Safety Commission, Central Bank of Nigeria, National Communication Commission, Federal Inland Revenue Service and the Nigeria Immigration Service.

Despite the concerted efforts embarked upon by the Federal Government over several years to get citizens registered and to obtain a National Identification Number (NIN), it was announced in May 2021 that only 54 million Nigerians, approximately 27% of the population, have been successfully registered since 2012.[7] It is unknown how many of these people have died or how many have which will make the estimate quite inaccurate. Death registration is very poor in Nigeria and even with that, its integration with the national identification system is yet to be achieved.[8]

Development of the identity management system in Nigeria has not been a cheap venture and its failure over several decades begs for answers. Since democratic rule returned to the country in 1999, successive governments have invested billions of Naira into the effort. However, this input has not matched the result. Its poor track record includes a former minister dying in police custody over accusations of corruption in 2004. Concession was later made to have a private company manage the project, which again became muddled in contract violation, abandonment and litigations, but not before more than 121 billion Naira (~$300 million dollars) had been committed.[9]

Convinced of the need for a working citizen identification system in line with the SDG 16.9 target, the Nigerian government is further enhancing its drive with a new digital identity effort. The government is injecting a fresh $433 million USD into the identity management infrastructure through a World Bank facility.[10] As part of strategies to provide guidance for the process, the federal government inaugurated a steering committee in June 2020 to guide the process.

Often, decisions are made without adequate consultations with experts outside of government circles. This contributes to inadequate assessment of the problems. When the problems are unknown or not properly understood, quick fixes are advocated rather than a holistic review of the system. Pertinent questions that need to be answered before a direction is taken for any new investment include: why has Nigeria failed to deliver on an identity system for several decades? How can the country best use the available resources to achieve more? What is the most sustainable way for Nigeria to achieve its goal? These pertinent questions should drive any decisions on the approach.

This opinion piece is written to contribute to the effort of achieving universal legal

identification in Nigeria as part of effort towards attainment of the SDGs, including suggestions on the role of integration of citizen identification and civil registration.

What exactly are the problems with achieving universal citizen identification in Nigeria?

Citizen Identification with issuance of a NIN is the responsibility of the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) which was established in 2007 by an Act of the National Assembly.[11] The Act empowers the agency to maintain a citizen's database for the country. Birth registration and immigration which establish citizenship are traditionally managed by the National Population Commission or Local Government Authorities, and the Nigeria Immigration Service respectively. The Act which established NIMC failed to acknowledge these established processes and promote ways for integration of these institutions. Rather, the Act granted NIMC the authority to also register births and deaths thereby resulting in duplicated responsibilities.

Recent guidelines from the United Nations Statistics Division highlights the importance and need for a unified civil registration and identity management system due to their interconnectedness.[12] This is based on logical reasoning and the advances that have been achieved today with the use of digital systems. Nigeria is making an effort towards universal birth registration as part of its commitment to the SDGs.[13] Thus, with a concerted effort to register all citizens at birth, this can be extended to providing a unique citizen identifier as well within an institution.

Despite being a Federation of 36 states, there is centralization of the identity management process without taking advantage of the sub-national governments at the state and local government areas. This governance structure is similar to what has been reported in the National Population Commission which has affected effective death registration in the country.[14] The local government is the closest level of governance to the people and can help fulfill this role. A recent report on progress that has been made in improving civil registration and citizen identification in Rwanda and Bangladesh notes an integration of multiple processes, streamlining of institutions and decentralization of responsibilities, while investing significantly in digital infrastructure to enable this success.[15] This effort has resulted in CRVS completeness improving from 2% to 70% within a few years in Bangladesh.[16] To make such strides, this paper proposes strategies that Nigeria needs to consider.

What does Nigeria need to do?

Nigeria needs to reorientate the identity management system through well-thought processes and the engagement of the different stakeholders to develop a holistic and efficient approach to identity management and civil registration. In conclusion, this piece offers the following recommendations:

1. Firstly, there is a need for an update to the legal mandate that establishes identity management and CRVS. This update must unify identity management and CRVS mandates. This will enable easy coordination of entry into the identity database through birth registration and an update of an individual's status through death registration. However, effort needs to be targeted towards improving death registration, which is currently below 10%, as the identity database will become bloated and useless over time without the completion of this cycle by status change at death.

2. There is a need for the decentralization of data collection responsibilities through the integration of local government authorities in this new process. Although the constitution of the country gave responsibility for

the local government authority to register births and deaths, it failed to elaborate on how the National Population Commission and the local government authorities would relate. The new process should integrate local governments to manage continuous data collection for citizen registration so that they can take ownership of the process and ensure that registration is a requirement for other government processes in their communities. This will indirectly enforce the need for registration. In this approach, we propose that the federal government builds and maintains the information and communication technology infrastructure for managing the data while day to day registration processes are completed by the local government authorities. This devolution of responsibilities should also embed artificial intelligence for monitoring purposes to enable detection of fraudulent and duplicate registrations.

3. Maintaining a universal identity management system in a country is not a cheap venture. It also requires strong political will. Thus, the government must ensure adequate financing of the identity management and civil registration infrastructure. While the government has secured initial funding for this drive, there is a need for sustained planning and budgeting for the identity management infrastructure beyond the intervention funds identified above. The collapsing of numerous institutions duplicating identity management, whereby one institution manages this registration process and shares the data with other institutions, will free resources that can be committed to strengthening the identity management system further. Future financing models must embed contributions from local government funds to stimulate their commitment and promotion of the identity management system in their communities.

4. To properly guide its utilization, managers of the identity management system must develop guidelines and conduct wide sensitization of policymakers and allied government institutions on the processes of connecting to and leveraging the identity management system. This might require a pronouncement against future investing in identity infrastructure by other agencies.

5. To rapidly gain momentum, the federal government should incentivize the effort by rewarding performing local governments and states to improve competition and at the same time institutionalize sanctions for local governments involved in fraudulent registrations.

Endnotes

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