NYU School of Law Warns Digital ID "Paving a Digital Road to Hell"

Description

USA: New York University's Center for Human Rights and Global Justice has issued a chilling warning about the potential dangers to human rights posed by the push for digital identity.

In mid-June, the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, a "hub for human rights study" at New York University (NYU) School of Law, issued a 100-page report detailing the growing dangers of a reliance on digital identity around the world. The report, titled *Paving a Digital Road to Hell?*, examines the role of the World Bank and other international networks which have been promoting the use if digital ID in recent years.

> TODAY, our Digital Welfare State & Human Rights Project launches a new report entitled: Paving a Digital Road to Hell? A Primer on the Role of the World Bank and Global Networks in Promoting Digital ID. pic.twitter.com/nvXcK81hCO
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> — Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (@humanrightsnyu) June 17, 2022

The report notes that the World Bank has been *"energetically promoting biometric and other digital ID systems that are increasingly linked to large-scale human rights violations, especially in the Global South."* The researchers warn that digital identity schemes *"promoted in the name of development and inclusion, might be achieving neither"*. Despite ostensible good intentions on the part of some promoting these systems, they *"may well be paving a digital road to hell."*

The press release for the report notes (emphasis added):

> *"Governments around the world have been investing heavily in digital identification systems, often with biometric components (digital ID). The rapid proliferation of such systems is driven by a new development consensus, packaged and **promoted by key global actors like the World Bank, but also by governments, foundations, vendors and consulting firms.**"*

The report states that many of the digital identity schemes are taking inspiration from the Aadhaar system in India. This specific digital ID model has prioritized digital ID as an "economic identity", according to the report. *"The goal of such systems is primarily to establish 'uniqueness' of individuals, commonly with the help of biometric technologies,"* the release states. This in turn allows for bringing in impoverished people from the "informal" or "counter-economy" to the formal economy. This also has the effect of "unlocking" their behavioral data that can then be used by governments and other parties.

The report also notes that the Executive Chairman of the influential ID4Africa, a platform where African governments and major companies in the digital ID market meet, noted at the 2022 Annual Meeting in June that digital ID is no longer about identity alone but,

> *"enables and interacts with authentication platforms, payments systems, digital signatures, data sharing, KYC systems, consent management and sectoral delivery platforms."*

The report details how the promoters of the new digital/economic identity model often evade "difficult questions" about the legal status and rights of those being registered. Despite promises of inclusion and flourishing digital economies, digital ID systems have *"consistently failed to deliver on these promises in real-world situations, especially for the most marginalized"*. The Aadhaar system itself has been criticized for severe and large-scale human rights violations.

In fact, the report finds that the evidence indicates it is the small group of companies and governments who stand to benefit most from these systems.

"After all, where digital ID systems have tended to excel is in generating lucrative contracts for biometrics companies and enhancing the surveillance and migration-control capabilities of governments."

Who is Driving the Push to Digital Identity?

The authors of the report also call for a *"more clearly developed notion of 'who' are the most relevant actors driving this agenda and 'what' are the key concepts that should be contested and reimagined."* They say that much can be learned by focusing on the actions of the World Bank Group, and " *more specifically its ID4D Initiative, as a central node in a more extensive global network of digital ID promotion."*

In 2014, the World Bank launched the Identification for Development (ID4D) program with the aim of solving the problem of a lack of identity for much of the so-called "developing world." The World Bank is funding digital biometric ID programs in Mexico, pushing digital ID in poorer countries with the ostensible goal of providing legal identity to the 1.1 billion people who do not currently have one.

This program was started with a *"catalytic investment"* from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Omidyar Network, as well as various governments. The report notes:

> *"We have noted that the World Bank and its ID4D Initiative do not stand alone in pursuing the digital ID agenda. They exist within a global network of organizations and individuals. This includes donor governments like the United Kingdom, the United States and France; global foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and Omidyar*

Network; tech-savvy governments such as in India and Estonia; the UN system, including the members of the UN-Legal Identity Agenda Task Force; regional development banks, including the Asian Development Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank; private biometrics corporations like Idemia, Thales, and Gemalto; card companies such as MasterCard; new networks such as the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA) and ID4Africa; and numerous other global organizations"

Many of the governments and companies listed above are also partners with the World Economic Forum, the proponents of "The Great Reset." The Gates Foundation is likely more well known to regular readers, but the Omidyar Network should also raise red flags. The Omidyar Network was set up by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and Pam Omidyar. To learn more about the history of Omidyar and his co-opting of the Snowden leaks via his ownership of *The Intercept*, read these investigations.

Interestingly, the NYU report states that proponents of this digital identity future have *"cloaked this new paradigm in the language of human rights and inclusion, arguing that such systems will help to achieve multiple Sustainable Development Goals."*

As I reported in my previous investigation, *Exposing the "Digital ID is a Human Right" Scam,* the push towards a digital identity has its roots in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a collection of 17 interlinked objectives adopted by the United Nations in 2015 with the ostensible goal of ending poverty, protecting the planet, and spreading peace and prosperity to all people by 2030.

The SDGs were part of a larger resolution known as the 2030 Agenda, or Agenda 2030, with the stated purpose of fighting climate change. While the United Nations SDGs and Agenda 2030 are often touted as a tool for establishing healthy multilateral relationships between nations, in truth, they are based in a deeper agenda to monitor, control, and direct all life on the planet.

The UN and the World Economic Forum have regularly promoted the idea of a digital identity as a necessity for life in the 2020s.

It's clear that this effort to strong-arm the world into accepting digital identity programs is part of a larger push towards biometrics, a track-and-trace society, and, eventually, tools like Central Bank Digital Currencies.

While the NYU report is the latest to warn about the dangers of the quickly approaching digital world, this is not the first warning. In April 2021, the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice published a skeptical piece titled "Everyone Counts! Ensuring that the human rights of all are respected in digital ID systems." This article looked at some of the ways marginalized populations are further marginalized by digital systems. They warn of the *"need for the human rights movement to engage in discussions about digital transformation so that fundamental rights are not lost in the rush to build a 'modern, digital state.'"*

In January 2020 — prior to the COVID-19 crisis and the increase in biometrics and vaccine passports — forty organizations signed a letter calling on an independent government watchdog to recommend a ban on U.S. government use of facial recognition technology. The organizations challenged the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board (PCLOB) to "*examine the more significant public concerns about the use of facial recognition in public spaces.*" They also called on the board to address concerns that

facial recognition software can be used by "*authoritarian governments to control minority populations and limit dissent*" and that this "*could spread quickly to democratic societies.*"

What is clear at this pressing moment is that it will take a combination of the people standing up and pushing back against these systems, and academics and think tanks like the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, to force a much needed debate about these technologies. The CHRGJ outlines the need for an "*equally global effort by the entire human rights ecosystem*" to counter the influence of the global network of digital identity advocates.

The *Paving a Digital Road to Hell?* report calls on each of us to ask these important questions to local, state, national, and international lawmakers:

> "*What can we in the human rights ecosystem meaningfully do, individually and collectively, to ensure that digital ID systems enhance, rather than jeopardize, the enjoyment of human rights?*"

> "*Is this even possible through digital ID systems?*"

If we do not have this crucial conversation we may miss an opportunity to prevent further violations of human rights, and loss of civil liberties.

By Derrick Broze

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