



‘Paving a Digital Road to Hell’: Digital ID Systems Could Lead to Severe, Irreversible Human Rights Violations

Description

The authors of a new [report](#) on digital identity systems warned “the actual and potential” human rights violations arising from the digital ID model can be “severe and potentially irreversible.”

The 100-page report — “Paving the Road to Hell? A Primer on the Role of the World Bank and Global Networks in Promoting Digital ID” — published by New York University’s (NYU) Center for Human Rights and Global Justice urged human rights organizations to heed the threats posed by a global push for digital IDs.

The NYU researchers said many proponents — including the World Bank — portray digital IDs as a means to achieving greater inclusivity and environmental sustainability when, in fact, the systems are likely to do just the opposite.

According to the report, the digital ID has been dressed up as an “unstoppable juggernaut and inevitable hallmark of modernity and development in the 21st century,” causing dissenting voices to be “written off as Luddites and barriers to progress.”

The authors argued for open debate “with full transparency and involving all relevant stakeholders,” including the most marginalized and most vulnerable.

The authors, who include Christiaan van Veen, L.L.M., special advisor on new technologies and human rights to the United Nations, urged the human rights community and related civic society organizations to ensure that global decisions about the adoption of digital ID systems are not hastily made but are based on “serious evidence and analysis.”

Where digital ID systems threaten human rights, the NYU researchers said, such endeavors should be “stopped altogether.”

Who’s really profiting?

“Governments around the world have been investing heavily in digital identification systems, often with

biometric components,” the authors said in a statement.

Digital ID systems that frequently collect biometric data — such as fingerprints, iris or other facial feature recognition — are being adopted to replace or complement non-digital government identification systems.

According to an Access Now special report, in India in October 2021, digital ID systems — or “Big ID programs” as Access Now called them — are being pushed by a market of actors who sell and profit from digital ID systems and infrastructure, often while endangering the human rights of the people they’re supposed to benefit.

The NYU researchers reached the same conclusion:

“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.”

Digital ID proponents argue the systems can contribute to inclusivity and sustainable development, with some going so far as to consider the adoption of digital ID systems a prerequisite for the realization of human rights.

But the NYU researchers said they believe the “ultimate objective” of digital ID systems is to “facilitate economic transactions and private sector service delivery while also bringing new, poorer, individuals into formal economies and ‘unlocking’ their behavioral data.”

“The promises of inclusion and flourishing digital economies might appear attractive on paper,” the researchers said, “but digital ID systems have consistently failed to deliver on these promises in real world situations, especially for the most marginalized.”

The authors added:

“In fact, evidence is emerging from many countries, most notably the mega digital ID project Aadhaar in India, of the severe and large-scale human rights violations linked to this model. These systems may in fact exacerbate pre-existing forms of exclusion and discrimination in public and private services. The use of new technologies may furthermore lead to novel forms of harm, including biometric exclusion, discrimination, and the many harms associated with ‘surveillance capitalism.’”

The benefits of using digital ID are “ill-defined” and “poorly documented,” the NYU authors said.

“From what evidence does exist, it seems that those who stand to benefit most may not be those ‘left behind,’ but instead a small group of companies and governments,” they wrote.

They added:

“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.”

More harm than good, especially for world's most marginalized

The authors did four things in their [report](#).

First, they examined the human rights impact of national digital ID systems and argued that a cost-benefit analysis of digital ID systems suggests they do more harm than good — especially for the world's most marginalized individuals.

“Through the embrace of digital technologies, the World Bank and a broader global

network of actors has been promoting a new paradigm for ID systems that prioritizes what we refer to as ‘economic identity,’” the authors wrote.

They added:

“These systems focus on fueling digital transactions and transforming individuals into traceable data. They often ignore the ability of identification systems to recognize not only that an individual is unique, but that they have a legal status with associated rights.

“Still, proponents 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.”

The authors added:

“Like physical roads, national digital identification systems with biometric components (digital ID systems) are presented as the public infrastructure of the digital future.

“Yet these particular infrastructures have proven to be dangerous, having been linked to severe and large-scale human rights violations in a range of countries around the world, affecting social, civil, and political rights.”

Prioritizing ‘economic identity’

Next, the researchers looked at how an “identification for development” agenda driven by multiple global actors came into being.

They discussed the digital ID system called [Aadhaar](#) that is currently being tried out by the government of India and the digital ID system promoted by the World Bank — [Identification for Development](#), commonly called the ID4D Initiative.

The ID4D Initiative draws inspiration from the highly criticized Aadhaar digital ID system in India.

In the Aadhaar system, individuals are voluntarily assigned a 12-digit random number by the [Unique Identification Authority of India](#) — a statutory authority backed by the government of India — that establishes the “uniqueness” of individuals with the help of demographic and biometric technologies.

This digital ID model, NYU report authors said, is dangerous because it prioritizes an “economic identity” for an individual.

The model is not about an individual’s identity alone, confirmed Joseph Atick, Ph.D., executive chairman of the influential ID4Africa, a platform where African governments and major companies in the digital ID market meet.

It’s about their economic interactions, Atick said.

The ID4D model “enables and interacts with authentication platforms, payments systems, digital signatures, data sharing, KYC systems, consent management and sectoral delivery platforms,” Atick announced at the start of ID4Africa’s 2022 annual meeting in mid-June, at the Palais de Congrès in Marrakesh, Morocco.

The authors of the NYU report criticized this model:

“The goal then, is not so much identity as it is identification. The three interlinked processes of identification, registration, and authorization are an exercise of power.

“Through this process, one actor acknowledges or denies another actor’s identity attributes. Individuals may be empowered through the process of identification, but such systems have long been used for the opposite purpose: to deny rights to certain groups and exclude them.”

Third, the authors assessed the nitty-gritty details of how the World Bank and its network of proponents of digital ID systems worked to implement an “identification for development” agenda around the globe.

They explained how the funding and governance of the ID4D Initiative operate, and claimed the World Bank and its corporate and governmental partners are “manufacturing consensus” by presuming that the shift to a digital ID model is inevitable, desirable and required for human progress.

But this “manufactured consensus” lacks a basis, they said.

“Concrete and robust evidence of the purported benefits associated with digital ID systems is rarely provided, it is merely asserted that digital ID will lead to inclusion and development,” the authors wrote.

3 steps privacy advocates can take

Finally, the authors outlined what human rights organizations and other civil society actors can do by highlighting three modes of action:

- **“Not so fast!”** Organizations can demand that governmental adoption of digital ID systems not be rushed.

The authors wrote:

“Before any new or augmented digital ID systems are rolled out nationwide, it is vital to establish an evidence base and take all necessary steps to anticipate and mitigate possible harms in advance. Baseline studies, research into the specific context, cost-benefit analyses, value for money analyses,

and impact assessments are necessary and should be demanded every step of the way.”

- **“Make it public.”** The design and possible implementation of a digital ID system need to be thoroughly discussed in democratic forums, including public media and Congress or parliaments.

“Civil society organizations should demand openness with regard to plans, tenders, and the involvement of foreign governments and international organizations,” they said.

- **“We are all stakeholders.”** While the World Bank presents itself as a respected advisor to governments who should be allowed to shape and create governments’ digital ID policies, it is only one actor.

“It is important to realize,” the authors wrote, “that, ultimately, everyone has a stake in systems of identification, digital or otherwise, which are essential to recognize individuals and effectuate their human rights.”

They added:

“More and more organizations and experts are beginning to grapple with the rapid spread of digital ID around the world, from digital rights organizations to groups representing people with disabilities, and from experts working on social and economic rights to development economists.

“As this range of organizations grows, it will be crucial to share experiences, learn from one another, and coordinate advocacy.”

Human rights alliances can ‘reimagine’ the ‘digital future’

According to the report, multidisciplinary and geographically diverse alliances can not only help to ensure digital ID systems are not deployed “in the harmful ways described in this primer,” but can “also help reimagine what the digital future without the particular model of ID systems promoted by the World Bank and others could look like.”

They said:

“As digital ID systems are determining the shape of governments and societies as we hurtle into the digital era, questions as to their form and design — and their very existence in the first place — are critical.

“What alternative visions can we offer that will better safeguard human rights and preserve the gains of countless years of struggle to improve the recognition and institutionalization of rights?

“When we bring together actors who want a society where the human rights of every individual and group are protected, what kinds of digital ID systems might we imagine? How might digital ID systems be designed to truly promote human well-being?

“How would this alternative, rights-fulfilling vision differ from the economic, transactional identity described here, as promoted by the World Bank and others? Indeed, would we have digitalized identification systems at all?”

The authors did not provide answers to these questions.

Rather, they aimed to “bring together the excellent work that our partners, colleagues, and others have tirelessly undertaken around the world” and facilitate collaboration “to ensure that the future of digital ID enhances, rather than jeopardizes, the enjoyment of human rights.”

By Suzanne Burdick, Ph.D.

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