

Chapter 6

Biometric National Identification:

An Essential Factor for Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

Emmanuel Eilu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2482-0535>
Uganda Christian University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

Fifty-five percent of the people living in sub-Saharan Africa lack any official identification documentation and this has created a huge identity gap. African countries are using biometric technology to pilot multimillion-dollar national identification projects aimed at narrowing the identity gaps. However, there has been little evidence published on the extent this technology has led to economic development and to narrowing the identity gap in sub-Saharan Africa. Using a narrative review, this chapter explores the role of the emerging biometric national identification technology in narrowing the identity gap and contributing to economic development in sub-Saharan Africa. This chapter is of significance in that it informs governments in developing and transitional countries especially in Africa on lessons learned from the pilot projects and suggests better ways of narrowing the identity gap using the emerging biometric national identification technology.

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that Africa has made progress towards poverty eradication. For example, recent statistics show that the percentage of the African population that live in extreme poverty decreased from 57 percent in 1990 to 41 percent in 2013 (Beegle et al. 2016, World Bank 2015). However, whereas the statistics are promising, the region still accounts for a half of the world extreme poor citizens (World Bank, 2017). Statistics show that, by 2013, there were still over 389 million people in Africa living on less than US\$1.90 a day, a figure less than all the other continental regions combined (World Bank 2015). East Asia and South Asia which had similar poverty rates with Africa in the 1990's, have so far reduced their poverty rates to an impressive 4 percent and 15 percent respectively (Beegle et al. 2016, World Bank 2015). Therefore, the World Bank (2017) advises that putting an end to global poverty necessitates an urgent proactive action in Africa through a well thought-out social inclusion strategy. The World Bank (2013) defines social inclusion as a process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society's developmental issues and equitably access social services. The key driver for a good social inclusion strategy is Identity, because individuals and groups are excluded or included as recipients of social services based on their identity (World Bank, 2017). One of the ways of enhancing the management of citizens' identification is by building a robust national identification program. National identification programs/systems achieve primarily two objectives: support national security and improve access to social, economic, political and financial services (Al-Khouri, 2007). Gelb and Clark (2013) observe that, without a robust national identification system, individuals often cannot exercise basic rights and access services necessary for financial and physical security, formal employment, or democratic participation. The inability to authenticate oneself when interacting with the state or with private entities such as banks or hospitals, inhibits access to basic rights and services, including education, formal employment, financial services, voting and social transfers. This, therefore, turns out to be the major cause of poverty (Gelb and Clark, 2013; IBRD, 2017).

A legal national identity is a key driver for eliminating poverty and achieving a wide- range of other development outcomes (IBRD, 2017). However, one of the major reasons as to why sub-Saharan Africa is still grappling with very high poverty levels is that many countries within the sub-Saharan region have weak traditional social structures that provide local identification (Izaguirre et al. 2014). There is still a large portion of the human population without proof of legal identity. IBRD (2017) states that there are about 1.1 billion people worldwide who do not have official identities, and about half of that population (502 million) are in Africa. Statistics also show that about 55 percent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa do not have official identification records (IST Africa, 2015). The identification

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