# Building a case for an integrated national unique identification system in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Good and efficient governance can no longer be separated from the level of advancement and use of information and communications technology (ICT) in a country. Several low and middle income countries have begun adopting electronic governance systems for the efficient management of citizen information. However, these efforts are threatened by various challenges. In Nigeria, the government has mandated the national identity management commission to issue unique national identifiers to citizens but this organization is different from the National Population Commission which registers births and deaths and relationship is not clearly defined. Likewise, several other institutions (Telecommunications regulator, Banking, Federal Road Safely) in the absence of a unique national identification system have created somewhat parallel documentation systems in the interim. We argue that there needs to be better coordination and streamlining of these several institutions which will improve effectiveness and efficiency of the identification system.

## Introduction

Good and efficient governance can no longer be separated from the level of advancement and use of information and communications technology (ICT) in a country (UNECA, 2014). The most advanced countries in the world today are undoubtedly those that have systems that are well integrated, leveraging information that can be mined from a variety of data sources. The status of advancement of a country's ICT system and use is already an indicator to measure the level of development of countries. Several low and middle income countries (LMIC) are beginning to leverage the potentials of ICT in governance and its use in administration and for ensuring accountability. However, it remains unclear how well many of them have been able to harness the benefits to their advantage. To this end, the Information Technology Union and its partners have begun brainstorming how best to measure progress in countries (UNECA, 2014).

Identification of citizens in information systems is a major challenge that can affect record linkages across different applications and organizations thereby threatening the success of ICT initiatives in governance. Different developed countries have different processes for uniquely identifying citizens in their systems. On the other hand, several LMIC are yet to achieve this feat thereby limiting the extent to which their systems can function in an enterprise networked environment. India recently recorded a landmark achievement through a private-led identification system (AbouZahr *et al.*, 2015). In the United States, the social security number has evolved as the preferred parameter for uniquely identifying individuals in different government and private systems. Sweden like other European countries has also developed an e-ID system to facilitate identification of individuals across different electronic platforms (Melin, Axelsson and Sˆderstrˆm, 2013). The unique citizen identifiers are necessary for citizen record linkages across systems and for achieving integration and interoperability of citizen focused systems. The difficulty in achieving linkage of systems is not a new problem with several papers pointing to the need for standardization (Melin, Axelsson and Sˆderstrˆm, 2013). As such, any new country adopting electronic information systems should not stumble in the dark like those that did early on. To this end, the lessons that those that have successfully developed enterprise governance systems have generated should be reference points for new countries that are adopting electronic governance information systems.

The application of unified citizen identification mechanisms have been successful interventions in various developed countries. The Swedish system demonstrates an important application of a unique national identifier for tracking the health of an individual over time (Ludvigsson *et al.*, 2009). Likewise, the Social Security Number in the United States is a major identifier for taxation and documentation of citizen and resident activities. Its importance in research on cause of death and death certification has also been documented (Williams, Demitrack and Fries, 1992). Other important applications of unified identification systems include for voter enrolment, citizen tracking, driver license issuance and fraud prevention.

In Nigeria, efforts are on-going to leverage the strength of ICT in all facets of the economy. The architectural structure of the information system and its scalability are important. These can affect data and record linkages and ultimately information quality. Poor coordination of agencies and limited vision by decision makers on the importance of information systems, its structure and how it should be prioritized are limiting the potential gains of these systems. This has resulted in the multiplicity of organizations with similar roles without appropriate coordination of activities which is a major limitation to the success of this endeavour. As a result of this lack of coordination, several information systems are being developed without the possibility of communication and exchanging of information.

## The Challenge

An absence of a unified national identification process can lead to duplication of efforts, waste of resources and threaten the achievement of the goals of the government in developing an enterprise governance system. In Nigeria, the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) is responsible for issuing unique identities to citizens of the country. However, this is only issued to those 16 years and older which is a challenge. This institution is different from the National Population Commission (NPC) which registers births, deaths and marriages and which also conducts the population census in the country. The linkage between birth registration and national identity registration remains unclear since this is not one of the documents routinely demanded during registration. These two organizations are different from the National Bureau of Statistics which is responsible for coordinating Statistical Operations of the National Statistical System in the production of Official Statistics in all the Federal Ministries, Departments and Agencies, State Statistical Agencies and Local

Government Councils. The Nigeria Immigration Service which issues International Passports to citizens also operates as a separate entity.

Lately, the central bank of Nigeria has also created another parallel system for the unique identification of individuals including collection of biometric information for the purpose of streamlining individual records and controlling the identity of individuals across different banks. This is also in an effort to reduce fraud. In the same vein, the Federal Road Safety Corp which issues licenses to drive obtains similar individual information including biometric details before a licence is issued. The National Communications Commission in its bid to reduce cyber-crime and telephony fraud instituted compulsory registration of phone lines with the collection of biometric information. Lately the Ministry of Finance has initiated a tax identification system which should there have been a functional national unique identification system will not have been necessary.

## Discussion

In some developed countries, the high level of completeness of the civil registration and vital statistics system has evolved into population registers thereby making the intermittent Census unnecessary and saving the government a lot of resources. The absence of unification between the different agencies that carry out identification of individuals in Nigeria (NIMC, NPC, NBS) is a limitation for achieving such feat. Also lately, the Nigerian Communication Commission and the Central Bank of Nigeria have requested documentation of citizen information for phone line registration and unified banking registration collecting similar data multiple times. Likewise, the Federal Road Safety Commission which issues licenses to prospective drivers in the country also began a process for collecting similar data inclusive of biometric parameters. Such duplicated efforts are resulting in a waste of resources and threatening the achievement of an enterprise network of government systems in the country.

For a citizen identification system to be successful there has to be an efficient use of resources and elimination of duplication of activities. The multiple points of collection of records of individuals increase the risk for theft of personal information and failure of the system. This is not the first time that Nigeria has attempted to create a national

identification system but like the first failure, this effort is threatened by inadequate laws, duplicity of organisations and threat of funding.

## Potential Solution

A properly and well-articulated process for managing national unique identifiers is urgently needed in Nigeria and possibly so in other developing countries which should start when a child is born. Also, there should be a single organization or a well-coordinated system for the management of citizen data. This node can then feed other government agencies with the information needed. Organizations that need to uniquely identify citizen can then connect t,o and use the data for specific transactions like the FRSC, INEC, Banks rather than creating parallel identification systems which does not build in efficiency. Furthermore, there needs to be better streamlining of responsibilities across government agencies which currently seem to be doing similar activities thereby duplicating efforts.

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