

The National Identity Management Crisis in Ghana

1. Introduction and Background

There is very little doubt about the fact that Ghana has over the years been experiencing an acute national identity management crisis. The multiplicity of national identification documents in the form of passports, drivers' licenses, social security cards, voter registration cards, birth certificates, national health insurance cards, etc., clearly point to the fact that the country is not managing its national identity data in a harmonized manner. Several Ghanaians have expressed concern about the fact that they need to carry several ID cards to transact business that otherwise could have been effected with just a single card.

1.1 National Identification Authority

The National Identification Authority (NIA) was established in 2006 by an Act of Parliament (Act 707) with the mandate to create a national database on all Ghanaians and foreigners permanently resident in Ghana. Many had hoped that the coming into being of the NIA would resolve the conundrum of multiple of identity cards. But, instead of synchronizing the existing identification documents, the NIA introduced another ID card: the GhanaCard. The exercise cost the Government of Ghana a staggering USD 12 million even though, in the end, it came to naught. Millions of people who partook in the exercise never received their cards as the NIA failed to print the cards of all registered persons. For some others, their cards were printed but they could not be traced, and so the NIA ended up with over two million undistributed cards in its offices.

1.2 New Proposal by NIA

On Tuesday, October 7, 2014 the NIA admitted the failure of the previous exercise and announced fresh proposals to ameliorate the situation. The new proposal which is a sole-sourced public-private-partnership (PPP) venture is in conjunction with IMS Ghana (a Ghanaian IT firm). It is intended to register 15 million Ghanaians by November 2015. The new GhanaCards are supposed to be smart cards that meet international standards. Curiously, it is reported that cost of the new project would be borne by IMS Ghana even though the NIA is currently chasing after a Chinese loan facility of USD 115 million. The NIA says the loan would be used to build infrastructure across the country to enhance its operations. It claims its underperformance is linked to the unavailability of resources, hence the need for the loan.

1.3 The Concern of Ghanaians

Many Ghanaians have welcomed this proposed intervention, at least, as part of the ongoing search for a credible identity management system for the country. However, the proposal has also triggered several questions in the minds of many Ghanaians, as is clear in the public conversation on the subject.

2. The Position of the Ghana Growth and Development Platform

The Ghana Growth and Development Platform (GGDP), in line with its objective of proffering expert views on national issues in a non-partisan manner, wishes to participate in the national discourse by raising the following questions:

- a. Why is the new proposal intended to register only 15 million Ghanaians out of a population of about 25 million?
- b. What is the rush or urgency in registering 15 million Ghanaians by November 2015?
- c. Why did the NIA not publicly go through a competitive bidding/tendering process but rather opted for sole-sourcing for such an important national project?
- d. Why is a private company bearing the cost of such an all-important project as the collection of data on Ghanaians? What are the exact financial details of this PPP? Is the company going to sell data on Ghanaians to recoup its investment and make a profit?
- e. What will be the significance of the GhanaCard if it only comes to add up to the preponderance of cards in the system?
- f. How will the new card fit into the decision of the Heads of State of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) who during their 45th Ordinary Session meeting in Accra, last July, approved recommendations for the introduction of a common biometric ID card system for all ECOWAS citizens?

3. GGDP Recommendations

On account of the above, the GGDP wishes to make the following recommendations:

- a. That the NIA puts its newly-proposed mass registration exercise on hold and engage the public more extensively to find out exactly what kind of national ID they prefer. We believe that the process must be demand-driven and not just undertaken for the sake of it.
- b. That the ongoing streets naming and property addressing exercise must be completed before any attempt is made to undertake a new registration exercise. Indeed, no national database would be credible if it does not contain a proper residential and commercial address system where citizens can be located.
- c. That instead of the NIA putting up new structures, the capacity of district assemblies should be built to undertake the exercise on a continuous basis in their respective districts. This would ensure that the usual panic and chaos associated with mass registrations would be avoided. Besides, local governance would also be enhanced if district assemblies are empowered to create and manage their own databases.
- d. That instead of registering different groups of people at the same time, the process should be divided into phases and implemented by age cohorts. For example, we propose:
 - Phase one: ages 0 – 15
 - Phase two: ages 16 – 30
 - Phase three: ages 31 – 45

- Phase four: ages 46 – 60
 - Phase five: ages 61 and above
- e. That the NIA must ensure transparency and accountability by making public the details of the agreement it has signed or intends to sign with IMS Ghana. Most particularly, we believe Ghanaians would want to know exactly how much is involved in the registration exercise.
 - f. That the government should promulgate legislation for data protection in order to avoid the misuse of personal data and enhance the confidence of Ghanaians in data that is collected.
 - g. That the NIA must ensure that the new GhanaCards would be implemented in compliance with the decision of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS to introduce a common sub-region-wide ID card system for all ECOWAS citizens.

4. Conclusion

It is our considered view that a national identity management system must be properly thought through and conscientiously implemented, so as to serve as a catalyst for national development. It should NOT be an avenue for duplication of efforts and wastage of scarce national resources. We therefore call on all Ghanaians to impress upon the Government to give us a “one-time” multi-purpose national identity card that would end our national identity management crisis.

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