

# GPECS II



## Global Project for Electoral Cycle Support II



GLOBAL COMPONENT



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## Digital identity in the biometric age A GPECS II Initiative

Developing economies have witnessed unprecedented growth in the use of ICTs in the last decade. In the area of electoral administration, most electoral management bodies (EMBs) use various forms of ICT these days, with growing use in the field of voter registration. In 2015, approximately 35 countries worldwide used some form of digital voter registration systems with biometric data analysis functionality. If implemented properly, such biometric voter registration (BVR) systems can increase transparency and credibility of voter registration processes through assisting in the detection of multiple registrants. Furthermore, the exercise usually involves the capture of digital photos placed on voter cards issued to voters. Not only can this subsequently lead to enhanced public confidence in the accuracy of a voter register, which can significantly contribute to credible and transparent elections, the quality and resources involved in the issuance of voter cards make these a *de facto* ID card in some countries with under-developed population registration systems. BVR systems, however, have their limitations. These include the reliance on foreign technology firms, occasional lack of IT capacity in the EMBs to take over the long-term management of the systems, challenges related to sourcing and training sufficient numbers of staff to manage the systems in the data capturing exercises in the field, and the lost opportunity presented by sourcing 'single use' computer systems that can, in the period during elections, sit idle in warehouses for

years at a time. The biggest concern arguably relates to the cost of procuring and deploying these systems, something the Secretary-General has raised concerns about in his 2013 biennial report to the General Assembly on the UN's work in support of democratic elections.

In some of the countries with underdeveloped population registration systems, UNDP is being approached by an increasing number of requests to support fledging digital population registration systems, including support to national ID card systems. This is in line with Target #16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to provide "legal identity for all (including birth registration) by 2030." Empowering individuals with legal identity combats all the negative consequences of 'identity exclusion,' where people without either identity documents or record of their existence in state civil registers are highly vulnerable to exploitation by criminal enterprises, and have enormous difficulty accessing state education, health and other social services. Legal identity empowers individuals before the law to exercise their civil and political rights, and comprehensive population registration systems can greatly assist UN Member States with socio-economic and spatial planning.

Yet the move to comprehensive birth-to-death population registration systems involve complex issues with regards to both the policy framework and sustainability. Introduction of a comprehensive 'national population register' that incorporates traditional registries



such as the civil register (births, deaths, marriages, etc.), requires states to decide how to link, if at all, any or all other state functional registers with the new system. Those functional registers include those that record issuance of passports and driving licences, for example, through to social security and individual tax registers, but also to registers that are traditionally more sensitive, such as the database documenting criminal record or interaction with the state judicial system. For some countries, matters such as ethnicity, which can be highly political and highly sensitive, are also recorded. Without adequate data protection legislative frameworks, therefore, and empowered data protection bodies ensuring respect for the law, there is scope for the misuse of data, including 'ethnic profiling' and cross-referencing of ethnicity, for example, against a data field like for 'criminal record'. Furthermore, in cases where there is multiple linking of registers and databases, there is the risk of contamination of data, via accidental or nefarious means, and the possibility of creating a 'single point of failure' in a person's digital identity. Hence, a policy framework must anticipate these developments. Only approximately half of the world's countries, however, have data protection and/or privacy laws.

Within the UN system, different agencies lead on support to countries in the development and management of particular population registers. While UNDESA is, since 1953, the UN system lead on civil registration and vital statistics policy and support to Member States, no one UN agency 'holds the pen' on matters related to overall population registration and identity management, and in particular the challenges posed by new digital

<sup>1</sup> Many national ID card systems rolled out in recent years feature smart cards with a readable chip holding multiple data fields, including not only data visible on the card, but potentially other data fields, readable by either stationary machines deployed in public and private institutions (such as banks) or by handheld or vehicle-mounted card readers, readable by, for example, state security officials. Other systems involve registering and empowering individuals with a digital identity, such as the Aadhar system in India, without the issuance of an ID card. The expected increased use of iris and facial recognition software systems, particularly in the context of state security, but also as a 'Know-Your-Customer' (KYC) measure within commerce, places further expectations on the international development community to keep pace with technological and policy developments in this sphere.

identity management systems employing high technology, biometric analysis features. There are existing initiatives in this field, such as the World Bank's 'ID4D' programme and the Global CRVS Working Group (currently chaired by the World Bank and supported by a secretariat in UNDESA), but a full, UN system-wide comprehensive approach to policy principles on identity management, and in particular digital identity management, is required.

With the expected expansion of digital identity management systems in the coming years,<sup>1</sup> UNDP is working within the broader UN system – including major implementing agencies such as UNICEF, WFP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNHCR – to both develop more comprehensive policy principles in this area, and coordinate their national, regional and global initiatives to ensure complementarity. This is particularly topical in the context of the continuing, and evolving, global debate about matters related to privacy and surveillance by state security forces.

Within UNDP's main tool for electoral assistance, GPECS (Phase II), UNDP will, on a cross-agency basis and in close cooperation with both UNDESA and the World Bank's ID4D (as well as other relevant international stakeholders), drive forward best practice in the field of sustainable digital identity management. Some of the steps envisaged in the GPECS II initiative will include:

- Engage with existing initiatives – in particular ID4D – to examine potential synergies and avoid duplication. This will include agreeing an overall digital identity management research agenda;
- Engaging the private technology sector in order to map future direction of technology-based digital identity management systems, in order to optimize sustainability and ensure that systems supported at national level by UNDP remain technology relevant and future adaptable;
- Supporting digital identity management pilot initiatives at national level where requested by Member States.

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