UNFAIR ID: DIGITAL IDENTITY FROM INJUSTICE TO RESISTANCE

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Today!

- Digital identity systems: the development promise
- The production of unfair ID: harmful outcomes
- Building fair ID!

Digital identity: what is it?

Digital identity: what is it?

▶ The term *digital identity* indicates the result of the **conversion** of human identities into digital, machine-readable data.

▶ In **digital identity systems**, the functions of *identification*, *authentication* and *authorisation* are all performed digitally.

▶ Global proliferation of digital identity systems!

Digital identity: what is it?

Digital identity systems involve the digital performance of three functions:

- **Identification** – the process of <u>establishing information</u> about an individual;

- **Authentication** - the process of <u>asserting an identity</u> established during identification;

- **Authorisation** - the process of <u>determining what actions may be performed</u> or services accessed based on the asserted and authenticated identity.

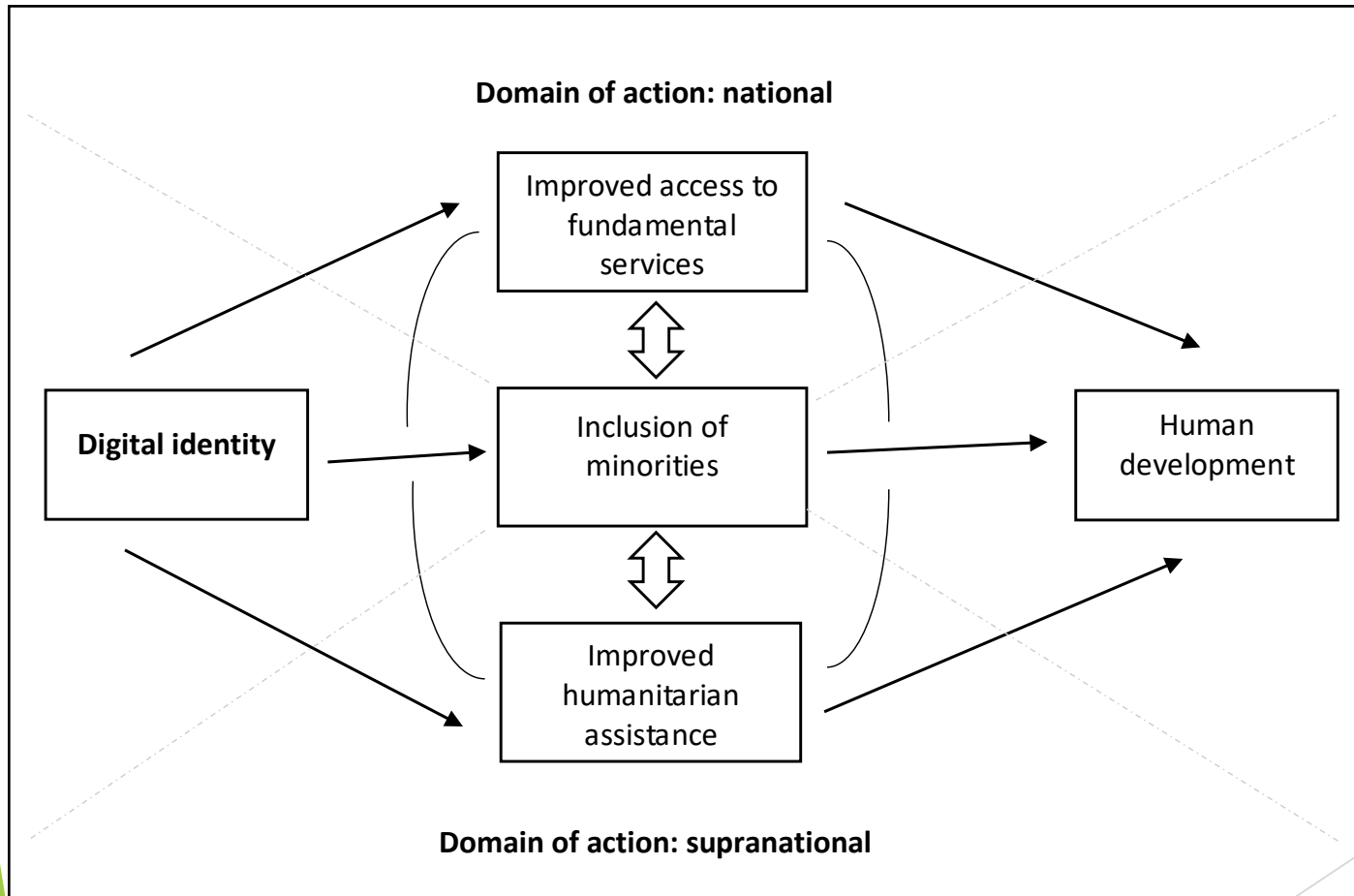# For example…

Digital identity:
The development promise

▶ By matching individuals with their digital credentials, digital identity schemes tackle **inclusion** and **exclusion** errors at the same time.

▶ For example, social protection programmes can easily identify entitled users, preventing leakage and ensuring that all the needful are served.

▶ Sustainable Development Goal target 16.9: reaching a "free and universal legal identity, including birth registration, by 2030".

Digital identity:
The development promise

A promise articulated across three threads:

▶ **Governmental services** – digital identity enables delivery of universal (health, education) & targeted governmental services (social safety nets, anti-poverty programmes, emergency assistance)

▶ **Inclusion of minorities** – digital identity promises to assist minorities and vulnerable groups that do not have their identity automatically recognised by service-providing organisations

▶ **Management of humanitarianism** – digital identity enables recognition of beneficiaries, making entitlement assignation accurate

Digital identity:
The development promise

Domain of action: national

Improved access to fundamental services

Digital identity

Inclusion of minorities

Human development

Improved humanitarian assistance

Domain of action: supranational

Source: Masiero, S., & Bailur, S. (2021). Digital identity for development: The quest for justice and a research agenda. *Information Technology for Development*, 27(1), 1-12.

But…

But…

Empirical studies of digital identity offer many problematisations of the development orthodoxy.

- Social welfare benefits: digital identity associated to erroneous **exclusions** of genuinely entitled users (cf. Khera, 2019; Chaudhuri, 2021; Martin & Taylor, 2021)

- Humanitarianism and assistance to minorities: coexistence of data-based assistance and **surveillance**, resulting into capture, deportation and even death (cf. Newell, 2020; Pelizza, 2020; Iazzolino, 2021)

- Outright **violation of human rights**: Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice, NYU (2022) – digital identity systems funded by World Bank's ID4D initiative result in documented **human rights harm**, while evidence of benefits remains "assumed, rather than proven"

How are harmful outcomes produced?

Digital ID: A Data Justice Lens

▶ Masiero & Das (2019): a data justice lens on the Aadhaar-based PDS in Karnataka

▶ **Data justice**: fairness in how people are visualised, represented and treated through their production of digital data (Taylor, 2017)

▶ Started as concept, now a field of research!

▶ With the **conversion** of identities into data, digital ID systems make people visible, represent them, and enable providers to treat them in more or less fair ways

▶ Fairness beyond Rawls (1971): questions on the "grammar of justice", interrogating the *who* of justice (who establishes criteria of fairness) and *how* these are enacted in people's lived experience.
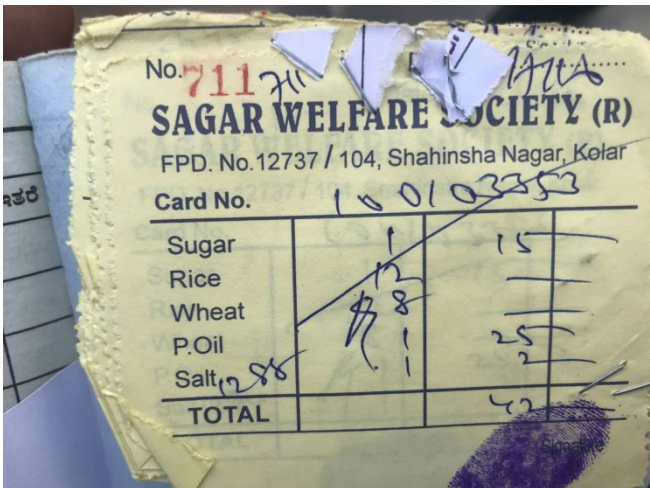
Digital ID: A Data Justice Lens

Three routes to Unfair ID (from Masiero & Das, 2019):

Legal injustice – injustice resulting from the conditionality of legal rights and entitlements to digital identification and authentication

Informational injustice – injustice perpetrated through obscuration of information on use of data from digital identification

Design-related injustice – injustice perpetrated through technology design, based on the technical features of digital identity systems

Harmful Outcomes of Digital ID

Legal injustice – injustice resulting from the conditionality of legal rights and entitlements to digital identification and authentication

▶ MD (2019): introducing digital authentication in ration shops results in **new exclusions** of users, squaring with most quantitative/qualitative studies of PDS

▶ Harm generated by the breach of fundamental human rights, where rights as essential as the right to food are made **conditional** to digital identification

▶ Conditionalisation of essential rights: Kenya (double registration in national and refugee databases; Dominican Republic (transition of residents of Haitian descent from citizen to foreigner)

Harmful Outcomes of Digital ID

Informational injustice – injustice perpetrated through obscuration of information on use of data from digital identification

▶MD (2019): PDS recipients not in the position to enquire on biometric data use; obscurity on the planned shift to **cash transfers** (Masiero & Prakash, 2019)

▶Resonates with more recent policy on COVID-19 subsidies in Colombia (Lopez, 2021) and Peru (Cerna Aragon, 2021): automated **algorithmic assignation** of subsidies, with opaque criteria for recipient households

▶Harm generated by **one-sided management** of user data, leaving users in the position of either registering for digital ID or remaining without basic entitlements.

Harmful Outcomes of Digital ID

Design-related – injustice perpetrated through technology design, based on the technical features of digital identity systems

▶ MD (2019): exclusion of non-entitled users, but no action towards the «excluded needy» of the PDS

▶ Harm generated by the very **design** of the technology, which is misaligned with the urgent need for rations

▶ **Dark matter** of digital ID: not a problem of alignment, but of harmful outcomes being directly designed in how the technology is built (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

▶ «Infrastructures of compassionate repression» (Iazzolino, 2021): care and policing conflated in the artefact, making one inextricable from the other.

So…

▶ The digital ID for development promise builds on digital identity to tackle inclusion and exclusion errors, hence building better government services, social protection and humanitarian assistance

▶ But: a data justice lens shows at least three types (legal, informational and design-related) of harmful outcomes of digital ID!

▶ An **open letter** from civil society organisations and researchers recently asked the World Bank to cease activities that promote harmful models of digital ID.

Building fair ID!

Some notes…

▶ First of all: **<u>fair ID is possible</u>**!

▶ But: it can only happen if we take stock of unfair ID, and realise the magnitude of harm inflicted from digital identity systems since their inception.

▶ How to build fair ID?

▶ **Data activism** as "sociotechnical practices that interrogate the fundamental paradigm shift brought about by datafication" (Milan & Van der Velden, 2016)

▶ **Proactive** (performative of affirmative engagement with data) and **reactive** data activism (tactics of resistance to data-induced harm)

▶ Both are integral to imagining fair ID!

…and so?

- My view as digital ID researcher is that we should learn from grassroot efforts on digital ID, developed with awareness of all three types of injustice.

- An important example from Kenya: **Haki na Sheria** (NGO promoting the rights of marginalized communities in Northern Kenya)

- Supported over 10,000 persons in acquiring **identification documents**, such as birth and ID registration, during mobile registration events and throughout weekly outreach and legal aid support

- Engages directly with the community on issues of digital ID and how these can be addressed

- A fair ID starts from **user engagement**!

THANK YOU!

To know more…
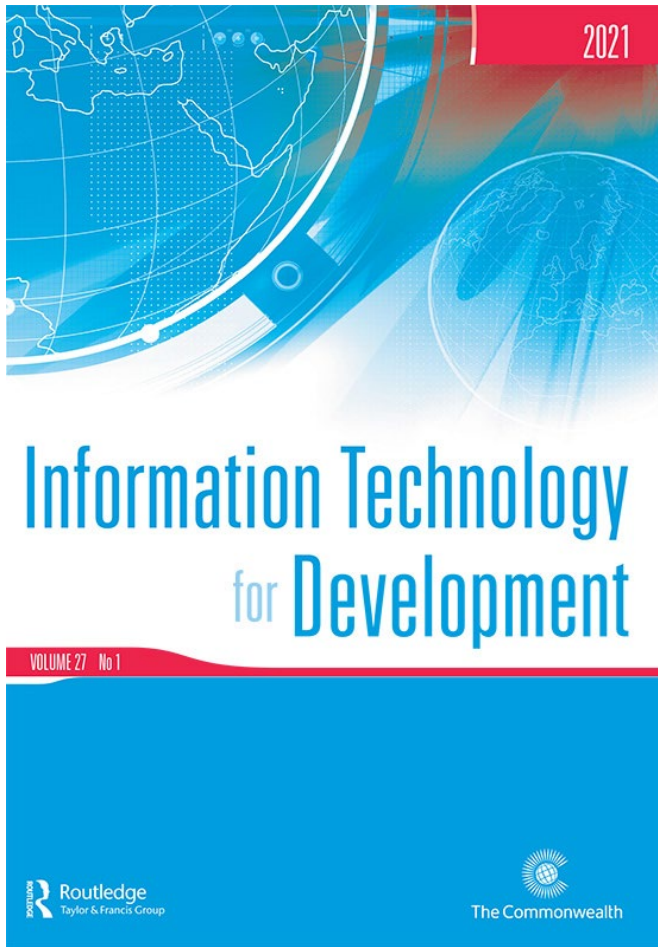
"Identification in a Digital Age: Implications for Development", Information Technology for Development 27(1): 2021

- ▶ 7 research papers

- ▶ 7 nations: India (3); Kenya (1); Ghana (1); Uganda & Bangladesh (1); Jordan, Lebanon & Uganda (1)

- ▶ Both governmental and supranational digital identity schemes

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