

AI in the Global South: Sites and Vocabularies of Digital Identity for Development

Digital IDs and AI-based interventions that rely on them are increasingly becoming central to imagining development in the Global South (Gelb and Metz 2018). This imagination is rooted in the problem that Global South countries often do not have a robust civil registration system. People living in the Global South lack access to a universalized legal identity and thus, face challenges in representing themselves to their respective nation-states. In calling attention to this problem, development studies scholars have articulated “right to registration” as a human right (Breckenridge and Szreter 2012). They argue that without the ability to prove one’s legal identity, the “discourse of entitlements, functionings, and capabilities” remains irrelevant “for the world’s anonymous poor” (Szreter 2007, 67). The efforts to resolve this problem center on developing infrastructure for issuing biometrics-based digital IDs to populations in the Global South (World Bank Group 2016b; Gelb and Clark 2013). Identification, however, is only the beginning. Digital IDs are also imagined as foundational resources for building data infrastructures that support AI-based interventions in digitizing public and private services. The ultimate goal of such interventions is to simultaneously achieve efficiency and inclusion in last mile delivery of services (World Bank Group 2016a). *Set against this backdrop, Data & Society is initiating a new research project to map the ongoing conversations on the opportunities and on-the-ground challenges of digital IDs and associated AI-based interventions for development in the Global South.*

Led by Ranjit Singh, a postdoctoral scholar in Data & Society’s AI on the Ground Initiative, this project will be conducted through a literature review and semi-structured qualitative interviews with expert researchers and practitioners in the field. It focuses on the following research questions:

1. What are the concepts and keywords that existing and new research publications as well as expert researchers and practitioners use in talking about designing and appropriating digital IDs and the role of AI for development in the Global South? *What is the conceptual vocabulary of digital IDs and AI for development in the Global South?*
2. How to turn hopes and doubts around digital IDs and AI emerging from different parts of the Global South into comparative case studies? *How to represent the contours of digital IDs and AI in the Global South?*
3. How are different countries in the Global South imagining and appropriating digital IDs as the foundation for their development initiatives and what is the role of AI in these efforts? *How does the sociotechnical culture of nation-states mutually shape their efforts in designing and appropriating digital IDs and AI?*

The project uses digital IDs as an entry point into an expansive set of global efforts to design and appropriate AI to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), broadly referred to as AI4SDG. Within this efforts, digital IDs are emerging as the foundation for new ideals of data-driven governance, where government is imagined as a platform that regulates the circulation of citizen data in real-time, and citizens are conceptualized as owners of unique data transacting with digital dashboards of public and private services (Singh 2019; Nilekani and Shah 2015). The project will explore emerging conditions of public private partnerships, fractured data environments, entity resolution, data-driven marginalization, precarity, and surveillance, along with concerns of fairness, accountability, transparency, and justice in achieving development through digital IDs and AI in the Global South.

The project is organized in two phases. *Phase 1* (October 2020 - August 2021) is dedicated to exploring the field through in-depth literature review of research papers, research reports, and books published in this field in the last ten years along with semi-structured qualitative interviews with expert researchers identified during the review. It will end with the release of a *lexicon report* on the conceptual vocabulary of digital IDs and AI for development in the Global South. *Phase 2* (September 2021 – August 2022) will have a narrower focus on exploring two or three compelling case studies to deep dive into the challenges and opportunities of digital IDs and AI in specific countries. Literature review in this phase will be directed specifically towards analyzing various aspects of these case studies and situating them in the infrastructural context of their respective countries. Qualitative interviews will be conducted with stakeholders (including designers, activists, and lawyers, as applicable) and expert researchers working on the case study or the country. It will end with the release of *individual reports* mapping infrastructural and ethical challenges in designing and appropriating digital IDs and AI for development for each case study and a broader *research report* comparing them. Additionally, we plan to release a *podcast series* based on the interviews conducted in each phase on a staggered schedule and a *workshop* inviting submissions on the conceptual vocabulary of digital IDs and AI in the Global South with organized focus group discussion sessions on case studies in August/September 2021.

This project will contribute to the ongoing and emerging work of expert researcher communities, specifically: (1) scholars working on human rights and their relationship with possible advantages and harms of digital IDs and AI-based interventions; and (2) those who work on ethics and implications of AI for development in their respective countries. It will also compare two to three exemplary case studies to illustrate the similarities and differences between concerns around designing and appropriating these technologies from different regions in the Global South. Furthermore, while there are a few case studies that have become central to critical data studies scholarship emerging from the Global North such as the Northpointe COMPAS algorithm (Angwin et al. 2016), a broader set of case studies from the rest of the world will contribute to a global perspective on unpacking how data-driven interventions and society

mutually shape each other. Within the fractured conditions of data environments (the limited extent of digitization and cross-compatibilities of available data) in the Global South, making digital IDs and AI “work” becomes an infrastructural problem that not only requires new sociomaterial investments in public private partnerships (PPPs), but also introduction of new workflows in existing practices to produce the conditions of possibility of operationalizing digital IDs and AI. The project will capture (1) the emerging nature of PPPs to implement such projects; and (2) infrastructural aspects of data collection and curation that often remains invisible in Global North contexts. In contending with the scale of Global South, this project will inevitably remain partial and incomplete, subject to our reach and efforts as individual researchers. However, it is a crucial step towards documenting how these technologies have become topics of everyday conversations across the globe and unraveling the conditions of life they perpetuate.

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