

## Providing a legal identity with digital data

A personal legal identity is crucial for accessing benefits and services, and is seen as a key driver for prosperity in developing countries. A digital identification system based on behavioural data can provide a legal identity for people in underdeveloped countries.

### About the research

Being able to verify personal identity is crucial for accessing rights, benefits and services – whether they are financial, health-related or educational.

There are currently an estimated 1.5 billion people worldwide without the means to officially verify who they are. Providing a legal identity for all is increasingly linked to human rights and development agendas; legal identity for all has been established as one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.

In developing countries, traditional identifiers such as date of birth or home address are not always available. For instance, births are not all registered, or the location of home may be unofficial or transient. The increasing use of digital technology means that individuals are leaving a trail of records about their daily lives and interactions. These 'behavioural identifiers' are building evidence of identity, which potentially could be collated to provide a legal identity for all individuals.

The ESRC-funded Building Digital Identities workshop in 2017 brought together social scientists, legal experts, technical and commercial specialists to explore the opportunities to collect behavioural identifiers for digital identity systems.

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### Policy implications

- International organisations, governments and the private sector should work together to provide a secure interface and data host for an identification system based on individuals' digital footprints, for those who do not have legal identities.
- The development of such a system should adopt a person-centred rights-based approach, respecting the protection of users' privacy, data protection and other legal rights enshrined within international human rights law.
- The UK should play a leading role in promoting effective regulation for identity systems, enabling effective public-private partnership work and investing in the development of standards across different platforms.
- The UK is well-placed to invest in research to develop a solid evidence base about the benefits and risks of digital identity systems. The research could also explore how key legal frameworks may evolve in relation to new technologies and influence domestic laws and regulations.

## Key findings

- The 1.5 billion people worldwide without a legal identity cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group. It is crucial to distinguish between different groups (for example, refugees, migrants, rural communities) and tailor the design of identity systems with these groups in mind, ensuring users are involved in the governance of these systems.
- We need a clearer understanding of how key legal frameworks at international and regional levels are likely to evolve in relation to new technologies, and how much they might influence domestic regulation.
- There is a clear role for behavioural identifiers to sit alongside existing identity systems and provide new lines of data that can be used for verification.
- Behavioural identifiers emphasise a person-centred approach in the development of digital identity systems, based on societal norms and expectations.
- Corporate organisations continue to play an important role in both driving and restraining innovation in this sector. There's a need to invest in effective partnerships and the development of standards across different systems. We need a better understanding of the role of effective regulation and how to harness innovation for identity systems.
- The technologies that support digital identity systems are evolving rapidly. Both private and public actors require intelligence to anticipate how digital infrastructure might evolve in the next 5-10 years. Failure to do so may lead to ineffective identity systems, which may have significant social and economic costs.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

In February 2017, the ESRC-funded workshop Building Digital Identities – convened by the University of Exeter and non-profit organisation Coalition – brought together leading researchers across the legal and social sciences, alongside technical and commercial specialists, to explore the challenges and the opportunities for digitally collecting and processing behavioural attributes for new digital identity systems.

Web:

*Building Digital Identities: A Scoping Study*  
<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/law/research/projects/project/?id=566>

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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