

# Le Monde

September 14, 2021

Translated from original. See original here :

[https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2021/09/12/dans-les-pays-pauvres-l-identite-numerique-comme-solution-contre-l-exclusion\\_6094401\\_3234.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2021/09/12/dans-les-pays-pauvres-l-identite-numerique-comme-solution-contre-l-exclusion_6094401_3234.html)

## In poor countries, digital identity as a solution to exclusion

Technological advancements in biometrics can help provide secure digital identity to previously undocumented populations. This approach aims to allow their integration into the formal economy.

By [Sophy Caulier](#)

One billion ! One billion people around the world, half of them in Africa, have no identity. In other words, nearly one in eight humans is outside the formal economy, does not have access to health, education, cannot open a bank account, change country, vote or access aid and services provided by their State.

*"Among them are those whose identity has been erased in order to migrate elsewhere or minors whose identity, if they have one, is deleted, so they can be sold into marriage or for work. But this is the minority. In underdeveloped countries, the non-existence of an identity poses many problems, and the pandemic has further accentuated the inequalities between those who have an identity and those who do not, because the latter did not have access to aid, care... ", regrets Joseph Atick, Chairman and CEO of ID4Africa.*

This non-governmental organization (NGO), which he created in 2014, is dedicated to helping African countries *"adopt digital identity responsibly and for the common good"*.

A math researcher at Stanford and Princeton, Joseph Atick dedicated himself very early on to developing algorithms for biometrics. *"Our idea was to link an identifier to biometrics - fingerprints at the time - because facial recognition was not yet precise enough. We wanted to develop an interoperable secure identity to facilitate population movements in a world without borders, a kind of global pass. Until September 11, 2001, we were idealists",* he admits. Today, biometrics and, in particular, facial recognition have proven to be viable and effective in terms of identification and authentication. *"It is also a way of securing identity regardless of who carries it, that is to say by avoiding bogus and easily hacked passwords,"* adds Joseph Atick.

The Indian Aadhaar project marks an important step in this area. At the end of the 2000s, in order to charge more taxes and put an end to multiple or non-existent identities, due to a lack of civil status registers, the Indian government launched the project for the digital identification of its population based on biometrics. It also gave them the opportunity to take a census. Each citizen is identified by a 12-digit number, their fingerprints, photos of their irises and face, as well as their names, sex, date and place of birth.

### **The risk of being placed on file**

This information is stored in a massive database, which makes Aadhaar the largest national identification project to date, with 1.3 billion people registered. However, the project is controversial, the security of access as well as the reliability of the data provided by the people themselves are questioned by some observers. Beyond these criticisms, *"Aadhaar has promoted financial inclusion: as an indication, India recorded the creation of 200 million new bank accounts after the deployment of the digital identifier,"* says Joseph Atick.

It is following this precedent that he created ID4Africa, today present in 48 countries of the continent, *"where the situation is very different from one country to another", he underlines. Depending on the country, people are given a physical card in addition to a digital identity, as in Tanzania, where 24 million people have been "identified", or a simple number, as in Nigeria where 60 million inhabitants are registered among the 200 million. But from identification to having information being recorded, there is only one step. In each country, an independent commission is created with an appropriate legal framework to ensure that the country will respect good practices, "that is to say that data such as caste or religion are not recorded,"* he insists. Digital identity is a double-edged sword ...