



The Humanitarian Sector & Digital Identity: Are We Affecting Refugees' Self-Identities?

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The Humanitarian Sector and Digital Identity: **Are We Affecting Refugees' Self-Identities?**

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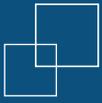
Interviewees



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Satyajit Suri	Digital ID expert	The World Bank
Silvia Masiero	Professor	University of Oslo
Verónica Arroyo	Digital ID Policy Lead	Access Now

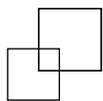
Key messages



- ▲ Identity is a complex and multifaceted construction. Understanding it and how our actions can influence one's identity need to be considered in humanitarian action and development programming. But to do that, there needs to be a shared understanding and definition of (digital) identity in the responding community.
- ▲ The impact on one's self-identity and feelings when being issued a digital identification depends on context, circumstances and the individual.
- ▲ Access and inclusiveness are the most important elements of digital identity in the humanitarian context, as they help determine beneficiaries' experience and feelings when receiving assistance.
- ▲ A host country's political will and economic abilities will often determine the services accessible for refugees with a digital identity.
- ▲ Risk assessment about the exclusion nature of technology, the level of digital divide and the available solutions should be in place.
- ▲ As the issuance of digital identification in humanitarian settings is a relatively new phenomena, more research is needed to better understand the long-term impact on the individual.
- ▲ The emerging academic field of Digital Sociology may prove to be a good partner for the humanitarian sector as organizations continue working in the digital-identification space.



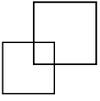
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Key terms



Stemming from digital identity, other terms have emerged that are imperative to facilitate one's overall understanding. In this paper, we use "identity" to refer to one's fundamental or sociological identity and "ID" to refer to all sorts of mundane identification for clarification, however, this is for a general distinction only.

Foundational ID: This proves who one claims to be and thus is not usually linked to any entitlements or services. Most often, a foundational ID is a national ID that identifies you as a recognized person within a given territory. Although a foundational ID can be one-and-only, foundational identification systems have subcategories ranging from national ID to population registration to birth registration.

Functional ID: This entitles holders to a specific service or facility through the use of certain elements of one's identity, e.g. name and date of birth. It is not a substitute for a foundational ID such as a national ID or passport. Some of the most common examples that people recognize are library or gym memberships. In the humanitarian context, functional ID could prove a person's entitlement to certain food packages or non-food items.

Credentials: These can be any attributes (e.g. unique ID number, PIN, eDocument, eID, mobile SIM ID,¹ fingerprints, physical card) that relate to a particular piece of information attached to one's identity. Credentials can be digitized but are generally limited in time and scope (e.g. driver's licence, education qualification, humanitarian entitlements).

Identification: The process of identifying a person, with individuals presenting personal attributes such as date of birth and biometrics, or temporary attributes such as address and employment. Identification could be done digitally or in person.

Identifier: This distinguishes a unique person, place and thing that can have multiple identifiers.² Personal identifiers are characteristics of individual humans that are difficult or impossible to change such as date of birth and genetic pattern.

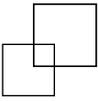
Identity authentication: Digital identities need to be verified to be useful, which requires an authentication infrastructure comprising a set of online portals, mobile applications, point-of-sale terminals or biometric terminals for biometric-based authentication.³ Digital authentication can be done using authentication factors formed by credentials defined earlier. This is the process of verifying a person's digital identity using one or more factors to prove identity. This process helps establish confidence in a digital identity infrastructure/system.

1 GSMA & World Bank Group. 2016. [Digital identity: Towards shared principles for public and private sector cooperation](#).

2 Camp, J. L. (2004). [Digital identity](#). IEEE Technology and Society Magazine, 23(3), 34–41.

3 Atick, J. J. 2017. Digital identity: [The essential guide](#). ID4 Africa Identity Forum [accessed May 2022].

Introduction



As of mid-2021, 84 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, 26.6 million of whom were refugees, 35 million children under age 18 and 1 million born as refugees.⁴ Meanwhile, the number of refugees who are able to return to their home country remains relatively low. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only 126,700 refugees returned home during the first half of 2021. This suggests that a large number of refugees will continue to live in exile for many years to come.

Home is where the roots of refugees' history, culture and identity have been nourished, but it becomes a place from which they have to flee considerable physical, economic and social hardships.⁵ How refugees internalize the situational change that their homeland can no longer provide them with safety and protection is already a big sociological question. But when we add the necessity of being issued a digital identity by a humanitarian organization or a foreign State in order to receive humanitarian assistance, we are presented with an even more intriguing sociological question.

A person's identity is informed by the society (i.e. culture, history) where they live, their social relationships, their memberships in a variety of social categories and their collective commonalities within the community.⁶ Having left behind their social networks and possessions, first-generation refugees may be able to sustain their culture and religion to some extent, even under the extreme conditions in camps. Second- and third-generation refugees may maintain their language and culture, passed on from elder family members, but other parts may be utterly confusing, thus impacting their ability to form an identity and feel a belonging to a place. For instance, in Dadaab, a large refugee complex in Kenya, refugee children are taught the Kenyan curriculum and have to study Kenyan history. Yet they are not allowed to leave the camps and see the country they are forced to learn about. Thus, escaping the camps is a journey some of them call the reclaiming of their lost identity.⁷

Although a digital identity is just a digital identification method that may have little to do with one's fundamental identity, there are unanswered questions from a sociological perspective surrounding the impact of digital identity in the refugee context. For example, will refugees' internalization of the situational change make a difference to how they perceive their identity over time? Does one's self-identity change when a foreign State's or a humanitarian organization's digital identification becomes mandatory in order to receive life-saving assistance? How does a digital identity make people feel when they have known only physical forms of identification (or none at all)? Do refugees really care about having a digital identity?

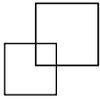
4 UNHCR. [Refugee data finder](#) [accessed May 2022].

5 GSMA. [Refugees and identity](#) [accessed May 2022].

6 Cerulo, K. A. (1997). [Identity construction: New issues, new directions](#). *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23(1), 385–409; Owens et al. (2010). [Three faces of identity](#). *Annual Review of Sociology*; Stryker & Burke. (2000). [The past, present, and future of an identity theory](#). *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

7 The New Humanitarian. 2019. [Returning to Dadaab](#) [accessed May 2022].

Identity from a sociological perspective



Identity research in sociology has developed into three traditions:

1. The internalization of social positions and their meanings as part of self-structure and self-concept. The internalization of a person's identity suggests that personalized identity meanings are results of repeated social interactions, and these meanings often are incorporated into a stable, trans-situational self-concept.
2. The impact of cultural meanings and social situations on a person's identity. The cultural and social shaping of a person's identity focus on the influence of local interactions and situational environments that inform localized meanings of situationally relevant identities.
3. The collective identity, which focuses more on group-level processes and emphasizes its roots in classic sociological constructs.⁸

Classic sociological identity theory presents the simple formula that society shapes self and social behaviours; commitment shapes identity and role-choice behaviour (Mead, 1934). Society is seen as a mosaic of durable patterned interactions and relationships embedded in numerous groups, organizations, communities and institutions, and intersected by cross-cutting boundaries of class, ethnicity, age, gender, religion⁹ and other variables (e.g. language). Individuals usually live in relatively small networks of social relationships by performing their roles¹⁰ (an employee, a parent, a friend, etc.) in such networks.

One's commitment to an identity has two dimensions: interactional and affective.¹¹ Interactional commitment means the extensiveness of a person's interactions in a social network through a particular role. Affective commitment is a person's emotional investment in relationships premised on the role. Thus, the salience of an identity reflects commitment to the role which relationships require that identity. For instance, a person would strongly feel his or her identity as a Christian by practicing the rituals and routines that Christianity requires of a Christian. This formula suggests that self is multifaceted, and individuals have as many identities as distinct networks of relationships where they play different roles and have different occupations.

8 Owens et al. (2010). [Three faces of identity](#). Annual Review of Sociology.

9 Stryker & Burke. (2000). [The past, present, and future of an identity theory](#). Social Psychology Quarterly.

10 Our social roles include, for example, being a parent, a spouse, a child (within your family network), a friend (friendship network), a team leader (professional network). Performing (or playing) means you do things that a parent, spouse, friend, or team leader would/should do.

11 Stryker, S. (2008). From Mead to a structural symbolic interactionism and beyond. Annual Review of Sociology. 34(2008).

Given the great range of work about identity, “identity” as a term becomes confusing and overburdened. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have proposed to unbundle the thick tangle of meanings around identity and to parcel out the work to less-congested terms:

Identification and categorization: Identification as an active and processual term invites us to specify the agents (oneself or others) who do the identifying, and it does not lead to the assumption that such identifying will result in internal sameness, distinctiveness or bounded groupness. Identification in the sociological sense does not require a specific “identifier” acknowledged by institutions. It can be very influential just by being carried by discourses or public narratives.¹² Categorization highlights the distinction between relational and categorical modes of identification, which is when people may identify themselves according to their position in a relational network or their membership in a categorical attribute, such as nationality, race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, etc. In this sense, the State is a powerful identifying agent not because it can create “identity” but because it has the material and symbolic resources to impose the categories and classificatory schemes.

Self-understanding and social location: It is important to see both terms in relation to each other, as one’s understanding of self is located in a social situation and involves psychoanalysis.

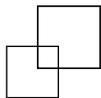
Commonality (sharing of common attributes), connectedness (relational ties that link people), groupness (sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group): Commonality and connectedness together can engender groupness, but connectedness is not always necessary for groupness. A typical example is that one can self-identify as a member of a particular nation and feel a sense of strongly bounded groupness because of a powerfully imagined and strongly felt commonality, such as shared history and symbol of nationality, but they do not necessarily have relational connectedness.¹³



12 Somers, M. R. (1994). The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*, 23(5), 605–649.

13 Calhoun, Craig J. 1997. *Nationalism*. University of Minnesota Press.

What is digital identity?



The term “digital identity” has a variety of connotations in different contexts for different people. A digital identity can be a foundational ID or functional ID. Usually, a foundational ID simply proves who you are in a given territory, whereas functional IDs are linked to various services.

In the humanitarian context, practitioners seem to have a similar interpretation of digital identity, yet a consensus of definition has not been reached. Below are some of our interviewees’ understanding of digital identity:

1: *Digital identity can be digital credentials issued by parties such as Governments and institutions. In the refugee context, digital identity is digital registration documents that affected people receive from humanitarian organizations.*
— Emrys Schoemaker, Caribou Digital

2: *From an operational standpoint, an identity is a set of identifiers, and in totality those identifiers determine the uniqueness of an individual. The digital sign means that these identifiers are in a digital format and can be read by a digital information system.*
— Joseph J. Atick, ID4Africa

3: *Digital identity in the humanitarian context is more of a combination of a functional ID and emerging technologies. Digital identity is one of humanitarian organizations’ efforts to give more access and control to individuals so that they can carry with them basic identification information about themselves for a certain purpose, service or need.*
— Joseph Oliveros, IFRC

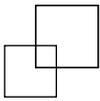
4: *Digital identity can be profiles or credentials of persons that you can validate against a centralized or decentralized database remotely or digitally.*
— Ken Okong’o, GSMA

5: *Identification information is the first layer of a digital identity. More subtle aspects of digital identity, such as entitlements and security, will be built in the second layer technically.*
— Sanjay Dharwadker, UNHCR

6: *Digital identity, in the State-led digital identity context, is a form of identity that converts a person or a population on a larger scale into digitally readable data so that it can be run by a digital machine.*
— Silvia Masiero, University of Oslo

It is critical to understand that a foundational ID is not always a legal ID. That foundational ID is legal ID only if a country declares that it considers the given ID legally acceptable. The important question for humanitarian organizations is which forms of IDs can authorities accept or recognize? Clarity on the matter requires a dialogue between humanitarian organizations and a country’s authorities.

Digital humanitarian IDs — better or worse?



Generally, people affected by humanitarian crises have mixed feelings towards digital identity. In most cases, they feel empowered and happy. Given that most crisis-affected people are undocumented or stateless or have lost their identity documents, having a humanitarian digital identity is a recognition of them as an individual and enables them to access essential assistance. Some are fascinated by emerging technologies, particularly biometrics.

On the flip side, there is frustration when Governments and policies refuse to accept humanitarian digital identity as a legitimate ID for services, despite the technical possibility. And some people are frightened by technologies, with a major fear of digital surveillance and function creep that may identify them as a particular category and put them in a vulnerable position.

Context is often the key to understanding an affected person's experience and feelings. For instance, Syrians had digital identity before the war in Syria began in 2010. So, when some Syrians became refugees, the concept of digital identity was not new and did not affect their sense of identity. However, Rohingya refugees do not appreciate how they are represented on the smart ID card issued by the UNHCR, as it identifies them as “forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals.” Since Myanmar claims the Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh,¹⁴ they are placed in a situation where neither country accepts them. In fact, what Rohingyas protest is not the digital identification system but rather that their identity itself has been divested from their culture, nation and ethnicity.¹⁵

In Lebanon, being identified as a refugee means one will be denied access to civil services, such as the labour market and financial institutions. In Uganda, the Government supported refugees to integrate and adapt to the host society without giving up their identity by adjusting its policy for positive impact.¹⁶

14 Radio Free Asia. 26 November 2018. Rohingya refugees protest, strike against smart ID cards issued in Bangladesh camps [accessed May 2022].

15 Washaly, N. (2019). Rohingya: The identity crisis. *Ecoss de La Academia*, 20.

16 GSMA. 2020. Proportionate regulation in Uganda: A gateway for refugees accessing mobile services in their own name [accessed May 2020].

All in all, the access to and inclusiveness of digital identity help determine the experience and feelings of affected people, which is less a humanitarian task and more of a political and economic challenge. Some humanitarian assistance has the capacity to be planned in a sustainable way that can establish roots for long-term empowerment. However, a full longer-term solution is ultimately part of national systems. Integrating refugees into a national system is an ambitious endeavour that is subject to factors including the host country's political will and economic ability; dialogues between host countries and humanitarian organizations; refugees' origins; and historical and political relations between the host countries and GSMA. 2020. Proportionate regulation in Uganda: A gateway for refugees accessing mobile services in their own name [accessed May 2020]. country of origins.



It's not about digital identity but Government policy and capability. It's almost like rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship, because you're doing what you can, because you can't tackle those bigger issues. And the bigger issues, which could really make things better, is advocating Governments to try to get more inclusion in civil society, social protection systems."

— Kerrie Holloway, ODI Institute

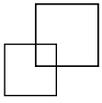


Another two interesting findings are related to Government-led digital identity in African countries and in a European country, Estonia. Across the African continent, several countries are looking to deploy digital identity into their national identity systems in response to “identity for all” and as a driver for social economic development.¹⁷ Providing that everyone has a similar digital identity that gives them economic belongingness, it is possible that a collective identity like nationalism becomes less important and economic belongingness becomes more important.

In Estonia's case, the nationalistic identity is not less important, as only Estonian citizens and residents, including e-residents, have exclusive access to the Government-issued eID and its e-services. So, it's more State bound than economy related. Estonia built its digital identity system from the beginning of the country's re-independence. Digital identity is incorporated into its national identity systems and linked to civil and private sector services. For an Estonian, the digital identity does not divide the digital Estonia and the physical Estonia, rather it is just a practical tool for safe and secure entry to (online) services.

17 Africa Renewal. 2021. [African countries embracing biometrics, digital IDs](#) [accessed May 2022].

Conclusion

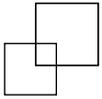


Theoretically, the change of a person's social situation and social networks can potentially influence how they internalize their concept of self. Being distant from their culture and homeland also affects how they perceive their collective identity, such as nationalism. However, throughout our research, **no strong relationship between digital identity in the refugee context and one's (self) "identity" was recognized.** Therefore, we cannot draw a decisive conclusion that digital identity does or does not have influence on an affected person's identity. It varies by context, circumstance and person. And since our interviewees were all responders rather than affected people, our information and understanding are largely third-hand.

Indeed, from the social constructivist perspective, a person's identity is affected by how they understand their role in social networks and their membership in social categories, which might not change dramatically in the refugee context. "Identity" is also a very social and cultural concept that is wrapped up in a sense of belonging in a place or a community. When a person is forced to leave their homeland and have a digital identity issued by a humanitarian organization or host country, this does not necessarily remove their belongingness to their culture, history, religion and so on. However, it begs further inquiries, such as to what extent can refugees sustain their cultural practices, religious rituals and other nation-specific traditions? And how does being a refugee affect a child's formation of identity? Clearly there is room for more research on the topic.

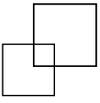


Recommendations for humanitarian organizations



- A humanitarian digital identity can be a tag for exclusion, separation and discrimination within a host community. When issuing IDs, humanitarian organizations must have a solid political, historical and cultural understanding of the operation contexts.
- Advocating and lobbying Governments to provide enabling policies and regulatory environments are the keys to determining access to opportunities and resources with a digital identity.
- Adopting digital identification technologies also needs to consider psychological, cultural and societal aspects to help make the affected people feel comfortable.
- Improving communication and transparency about how digital systems work will help people to determine eligibility.
- Collecting user needs and desires to inform technical design is imperative. Encourage solution developers to build identity systems that promote inclusion.
- Strategic partnerships require programmatic work to bridge the gaps around capabilities and knowledge between implementers, Governments, NGOs, UN agencies and technology solutions.
- Participating and engaging at the international level is needed to align with best practices and standards. Standards increase the possibility of mutual recognition and interoperability.
- Offering identification solutions that are easily adaptable in different country operations requires a number of political, social and economic agreements between different parties and tailoring systems that can connect with each other.
- Building user trust requires standards to safeguard data and legal frameworks that regulate data collection and data management.
- Invest more to benefit end users/affected people rather than just organizational efficiency.

Potential future research topics



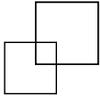
During our research, we quickly discovered that the topic of creating identification for refugees (as well as for internally displaced people) is a big topic. Our focus was on how such issuance may affect a person's self-identity, but we collected several other research ideas that could be explored by humanitarians and academics or both.

- An agreed set of definitions is needed surrounding (digital) identification. Using the same language facilitates interoperability and builds linkage with private sector services and Government-issued IDs.
- How do refugees internalize digital identification and does this have a long-term impact?
- A foundational ID is always designed with strong nationalist symbols that may invoke strong nationalism. But that all disappears for a digital identity within the refugee context. Will that affect people's sense of nationalism?
- For people who culturally or historically have not been identified, what does the introduction of a digital identity mean for them?
- What is the expected evolution of digital identities in the humanitarian sector and why? For instance, the Netherlands Red Cross proved that issuing a self-sovereign identity is currently of no value.¹⁸ As a result, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has shifted to a dignified digital ID.¹⁹
- What is digital sovereignty and who has the right to determine digital sovereignty (Martin et al., 2022)? How may this impact the humanitarian sector?
- How can humanitarian organizations shift from piloting digital IDs to leveraging it for bigger impacts? What is the promise of a digital ID and what is the evidence of its benefits?
- What type of trade-offs, risks or inconveniences in the identification space can humanitarian organizations accept to make beneficiaries' lives easier?
- When issuing an ID, how can the consent mechanism be extremely user friendly while also ensuring adequate communication?
- How can organizations empower affected people with all the benefits of a digital ID without creating a centralized data honeypot?

18 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 2021. [An analysis for the humanitarian sector](#).

19 International Center for Humanitarian Affairs. 2022. [Dignified identities in cash assistance: Lessons learnt from Kenya](#).

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