

Why we are replacing National ID card with smart cards - NIMC boss

Chris E. Onyemenam is the Director General and Chief Executive of the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC). In this interview, he explained why the commission is establishing a data base for identity management in the country, the replacement of multiple identity cards with smart cards, the registration of mobile phones SIM card, among other related issues. Excerpts:

By Nuruddeen M. Abdallah & Ahmad Salkida

How would you explain this task of providing identity data base to Nigerians?

One of the things we want to do and is provided for in the NIMC Act is that there will be a national identity data base. This data base will be accessible by the private and public sectors. Secondly, the verification process, that is authentication and verification of individual's identity requires some infrastructure. We will add that to the existing infrastructure. Thirdly, the number that we have in the data base that was used in issuing the national identity card is about 38 million. We will validate that number and also populate that data base. So, it will move from 38 million to about 100 million. The Act provides for registration of citizens and persons legally resident who are 15 years and above, it also provides for us to register death and birth. And because of the statutory functions of other institutions of government that appear to overlap that aspect of the Act, we are currently working out the modalities for effectively harmonising the resources with the National Population Commission (NPC) to settle that. So that from birth to 15 years, 354 days, 23 hours, 29 minute, etc, you fall into that category that cannot be registered because it is 15 years and above. But we must take care of that to be able to have a full picture of register-able Nigerians

that you can give a place in the data base.

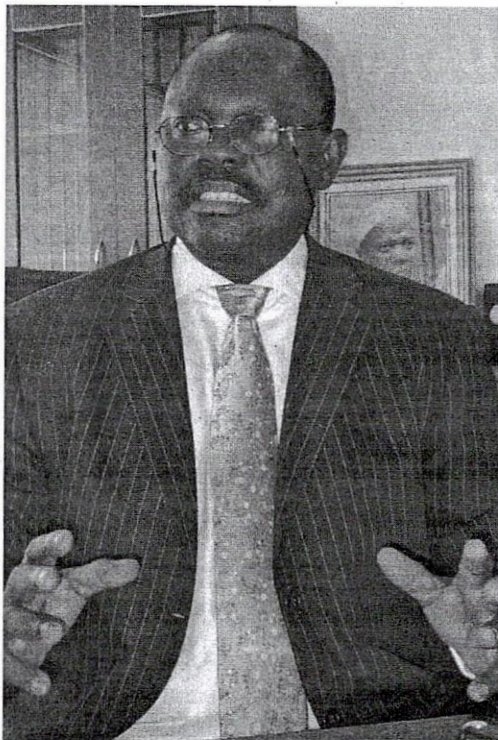
There is an arrangement call a family tree. The family tree is such that your son who is 14 will be included into that identity lop, until when he is 16 years old before you can take his finger print and put it into the system. The reason why we choose 16 years and above is that though there is a technology that can be use at birth to 15 years and above. But we do not want to rush into that. Provision is made for that, but we don't want to rush into using this technology now. Where they are being used it is still been experimented and tested. But we have taken a deliberate policy decision that we should go along those recognisable and clearly acceptable lines of documentation and it is scientifically acceptable that fingerprints have taken a clearly secondary structure.

How long would this project take?

Because it is a sector reform that affects every aspect of identity management, we may have to break it down into these components for you to understand the overlapping nature and how long it will take. In countries where it has been successfully implemented, it has taken between three to five years to plan. Planning takes all of the time. A technology once you

decide on it, you can easily get it from the market and management becomes an ongoing concern. We started this effort of planning in 2005, when the decision was taken by government to really review the scenario of multiple identities. Because of what we are trying to do of managing identity by making an arrangement that if you say this is your name, you cannot go elsewhere and claim another name. Once you can present yourself to different people with different names, it means you have multiple identities and it is possible for you to commit fraud. For instance, people can go to the road side and do an identification card, with all fictitious information, for one particular purpose only; may be to cash a cheque at the bank. And because, the banks have no other way of verifying the ID card, they just photocopy the card and the cheque and pay. And this bring problem when they found out the truth later. This is because there is no data base that can be referred to, for verification of information. We have a data base now but we don't access it for verification purpose. If you want to verify the authenticity of the national identity card a person presented, there is information on it, that you can check, but the facility to enable you check it is not there. So, what banks do is just to photocopy it and document it.

“Nigeria is over 140 million, and it is expected that close to 100 million should be in the data base, and yet what we have is 38 million



CHRIS E. Onyemenam

That is not verification. It is not an authentication of an individual's identity. This is the issue we want to address and in the next nine months it will be in place.

But the data base has just few people. Nigeria is over 140 million, and it is expected that close to 100 million should be in the data base, and yet what we have is 38 million. So we need to populate that data base. What used to happen was to ask Nigerians to come out, and line up and we count them. After some periods, there was no other effort. In 2004, the national ID card mass registration was done, and since then there has not been any mass exercise. So, those who were not eligible then are still waiting for another mass registration exercise before they can be registered. And, some come from a far to come and register here. Now, if we have to do it that way, we may not succeed in getting enough Nigerians on that data base. Government has realised the cost in that exercise and then it suggested partnership with the private sector, which is now working on an arrangement to help government open registration centres to continue the registration exercise forever. In this way, people will come when they want to register. You are single and you later get married you go there to register your present status. You move from one part of the country to another, you go to the centre and update your record. They are permanent centres, managed by the private sector so that they can be run in an efficient manner. That is what we will do to increase the current

data base. Once we reach an agreement with the private sector, they will start from next year. And within three years it is expected that they will have registered over 100 million Nigerians and also issue them with smart cards. To use the smart card, there are card acceptance devices that will be available everywhere. The private sector has a concession of 10 years to enable them to roll out and recover their money.

Are you saying that Nigerians would pay for the smart cards?

No. That is why I said the ID card is not the focus, it is the data base. Nigerians pay for driver's licence and criminals stay in their houses to get a driver's licence with fictitious information. But because it is a licence with name and picture, it is accepted in the bank. But, if the data base has everybody's name, the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) will use the data base and they will be able to confirm the true identity of the person they are issuing the licence to. Their data base will also have a connection with our data base. It will then be difficult to use different names to get the licence. Because people are paying for the driver's licence, FRSC will pay for accessing the data base to confirm the identity of the person they want to issue a driver's licence to. The private sector that helped to put it in place will collect their money over time from that kind of transaction. It is the FRSC that will now part with small money from what they are charging the people. So, it is better to part with that small amount so that people do not fake their product. And that is why they are also upgrading their equipments.

Cont'd on page 23

'Why we are replacing National ID card with smart cards'

Cont'd from page 22

How much will the smart cards cost?

The private sector will issue the card after the data base is established. They will provide card acceptance devices with which verification can be done. In other countries, most of it is sponsored by the government. In the USA, the cost was too much they did not think of doing it again. In the UK, it is the same problem of having a central identity management. So they created an arrangement to enable everybody cross check what everybody wants to know. They go through various data base to confirm the identity of a person. They have electronic data bases that are running on the same principle. But in Nigeria, we don't have that. The one we have is the finger print identity and it is focus only on issuing card, not identity management. We are having data base which will include everybody and all parastatals that deal with people. What they just need to do is to connect with us and get what they want.

The data base itself is a government responsibility because of its sensitive nature. But what we want to do is to try as much as possible to reduce the cost for government for this reform, which is why we are bringing in the private sector. In terms of collection of data and populate the data centre, the private sector is responsible for that. In terms of the data base and its security, the government has so far spent less than N2 billion. And by the time government would have finished spending on that portion of it, it will be about N5 billion.

If the private sector will build and operate the infrastructure for data collection, so long as they are going to provide the money; all government needs to do is to be sure that within the concession period the risk it transfers to them are not get back. And, at the end of the day, what government expect is what is delivered. The private sector is the one handling the cost with their lender. I don't have an idea of how much, but the concession so far is not more than N7 billion.

Can you tell us the private firms handling this project?

Government follows the procurement procedure to appoint two consortiums: The Charms Consortium and IRIS Smart Technology Limited. They will basically capture data, issue smart cards and provide the card acceptance machine. They will spend their monies doing this and recoup their money over a 10 year period.

Don't you think giving private firms the data base contract is capable of jeopardising the security of the country?

The owners of the private firms are Nigerians even though they have foreign partners. Recently, the UK awarded a portion of their own similar thing to American



CHRIS E. Onyemenam

and French companies. The American awarded theirs to a combination of French and American companies. I don't see anything wrong in giving ours to Nigerians with foreign partners.

However, the point about whether it is going to jeopardise security is the reason why the data base is under the supervision and management of government. And if you look at our board, it comprises of members from the State Security Services (SSS), the National Security Adviser (NSA), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Nigeria Police and other security agencies. The idea is to achieve some level of integration.

NIMC is also said to be involved in prepaid mobile

phones SIM cards registration. How far have you gone?

The SIM card registration is part of the harmonisation and integration. For instance, pay-as-you-go is the one you buy the SIM card or scratch card and criminal have been using it. This effort is about the partnership with National Communications Commission (NCC) to provide the unique national identity data base so that when you take pay-as-you-go, they will link it to the identity of the individual. This means it is not longer anonymous, because it has been identify with somebody that is in the data base. So, if a criminal uses his line, his conversion is there. You can know the person whose SIM card is used by the time you check on the national identity data base.

When will the SIM card registration starts?

I am not in the position to say when the SIM registration will start, the executive vice chairman of NCC is the person that can disclose that. But I know that effort has also been completed to start very soon.

With the controversy and alleged fraud that characterised the National ID card project, what is the possibility that this project will not suffer the same fate?

It is true that past effort had faced challenges. At time, it could be from the period between policy statement, implementation and outcome. At others, because we are impatient, we expect

immediate result. And if it is not forthcoming, we begin to cry foul. While in others, we put the implementers under unnecessary pressures, so they tell people everything will be ready soon while they know it will not. We don't want what happened in the past to distract our focus.

Secondly, one of the things we have done is to us what is available. We have decided that there should no wastage of resources so we are putting the existing infrastructure into use. If it is a situation where the technology is not obsolete we shall use it. This is what we are doing in terms of planning, implementation and strategy.

Thirdly, Nigerians are rightly impatient with the issue of identification card. This is because the focus is on having an ID card. But currently, all forms of identification in Nigeria are in-complete because there is no verification support. And as soon as we put that in place, we can shout eureka.

66 The private sector is the one handling the cost with their lender. I don't have an idea of how much, but the concession so far is not more than N7 billion