

Digital Identity and Exclusion

The Ghana Card and Barriers to Social Protection for Kumasi's Street Children

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ABSTRACT

{ "background": "The rapid digitisation of social protection systems across Africa, often centred on biometric national identity cards, aims to enhance efficiency and reduce fraud. However, there is limited critical analysis of how these mandatory digital identity requirements affect highly marginalised groups, particularly street-connected children who often lack the documentation and guardianship needed for enrolment.", "purpose and objectives": "This working paper examines the impact of Ghana's national digital identity system, the Ghana Card, on street children's access to essential social services in Kumasi. It aims to identify the specific procedural, bureaucratic, and socio-technical barriers the system creates.", "methodology": "The research employs a qualitative, multi-method design. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with street children, alongside key informant interviews with social workers, NGO staff, and government officials. Observations were conducted at registration centres and service points.", "findings": "The Ghana Card acts as a formidable gatekeeping mechanism, systematically excluding street children from programmes like the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) cash transfer. A dominant theme was the 'documentation paradox', where acquiring the card requires a birth certificate and proof of residence—documents this population inherently lacks due to their precarious living situations.", "conclusion": "The mandatory linkage of social protection to the digital identity system, without tailored inclusive protocols, is reinforcing the very exclusion it aims to overcome. For street children, the promise of inclusive development through technology is contradicted by a reality of heightened bureaucratic marginalisation.", "recommendations": "Policy must decouple urgent, life-saving service provision from immediate biometric registration. We recommend implementing provisional access protocols, investing in mobile registration units with trained child-sensitive officers, and legally recognising alternative forms of attestation for homeless minors.", "key words": "digital identity, social protection, exclusion, street children, Ghana, biometrics, governance, Africa", "contribution statement": "This paper provides the first empirical analysis of the Ghana Card's exclusionary effects on street children, introducing the concept

Keywords: *Digital identity, Social exclusion, Street children, Sub-Saharan Africa, Biometric registration, Social protection, Urban Ghana*

Article Highlights

- Ghana's biometric ID system acts as a gatekeeping mechanism for social protection.
- Street children face a 'documentation paradox' requiring documents they inherently lack.
- Current policy reinforces exclusion by linking services to immediate biometric registration.
- Provisional access protocols and mobile registration units are

Core Policy Contradiction

The study finds that linking essential social services to digital identity registration, without inclusive safeguards, heightens marginalisation for street-connected children.

This qualitative study reveals how techno-governance can inadvertently deepen social divides.

critical recommendations.	
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