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'Megalomaniac Ambition for Total Control': Governments Eye New Gates-Funded Biometric Digital ID System

The Modular Open Source Identity Platform, modeled after India's biometric database, is expanding globally despite controversy over consent and data protections, but privacy advocates warn the Gates Foundation-funded digital ID initiative could enable tracking citizens "from cradle to grave."

By Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D.

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Spurred in part by the COVID-19 pandemic and the push for digital vaccine "passports," a growing number of global governments are considering implementing biometric digital ID

programs that would require citizens to obtain digital identification credentials to access public goods and services.

Until recently, concerns about the global interoperability of digital systems and the risk of technological "lock-in" to platforms developed by private actors stymied governments' plans to implement such programs.

Now, backers of a new open-source platform called MOSIP (Modular Open Source Identity Platform) — whose funders include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Bank and eBay founder Pierre Omidyar — are touting the platform as a solution to both these obstacles.

Developed at the International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore in India and modeled after Aadhaar, India's nationwide digital ID platform and the largest such system in the world, MOSIP "enables countries with low IT capacity to quickly roll out specialized digital identity solutions to their citizens," according to Identity Review.

Proponents argue the rollout of platforms like MOSIP will help people, especially in low- and middle-income countries, gain access to vital public goods and services.

They also argue the platforms will help the global community fulfill the United Nation's (U.N.) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include requiring everyone — including infants — to have a digital identity by 2030 in order to work, vote, and access financial, social and medical services.

But for critics, technologies like MOSIP represent a threat to individual liberty and another step toward a digital panopticon — a widespread rollout of government-mandated surveillance technologies, including "vaccine passports" and other digital identification tools, that spell the end of personal privacy.

What is digital identity?

Michael Rectenwald, Ph.D., author of "Google Archipelago: The Digital Gulag and the Simulation of Freedom," told The Defender:

> "The OECD [Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development] defines digital identity as 'the sum total of the growing and evolving mass of information about us, our profiles and the history of our activities online that relates to inferences made about us, based on this mass of information.'"

"Digital identity is thus not merely a new, more handy, lightweight, digital form of identification," Rectenwald said. "It refers to a collection of data that purportedly define who we are, including what we do both online and off-line — if 'off-line' life can still be said to exist — and not merely to a means by which we can be identified as such."

Greg Glaser, a California attorney, said, "normal" people think of IDs as a normal thing, but the reality of the biometric digital ID is "far more sinister."

Glaser said that today, rights, citizenship status, affiliations, standing in court, accounts, privileges, services, land title and more all fundamentally depend on some form of identification.

"A person can hardly access any of the above without some form of ID," Glaser said, "mostly meaning name but often numbers, which are increasingly linked to biometrics."

But for governments, Glaser said, "Controlling people means controlling ID. Even national governments are now wholly dependent on their organizational and corporate IDs for their transactions, bonds, taxes, and privileges."

Biometric surveillance covers a range of identification measures and technologies, including facial recognition, voice recognition, fingerprint databases, DNA databases, iris scans, heart rate scans, gait recognition — even emotion detection through the analysis of facial expressions and mannerisms.

According to the Gates Foundation, "Digital ID systems are one of the three pillars of what's known as digital public infrastructure (DPI)" along with digital payment systems and data exchange systems. They are similar to "the roads and bridges that helped reshape economies in the 19th century."

"Researchers say DPI can help low- and middle-income countries leapfrog traditional stages of development, lift millions out of poverty, and spur economic growth," the foundation said.

Such a system "is critical because people need a verified identity in order to tap into DPI's other benefits, from digital bank accounts and instant payments to mobile phone accounts and personal data management," said the Gates Foundation.

"If a person cannot prove who they are, how can they take advantage of all of the opportunities society has to offer?" the foundation asked.

According to the foundation, "850 million people around the world ... lack any acceptable form of legal identity" and "more than half of those without proof of identity are children whose births were not registered." One in two women in low-income countries do not have ID, the foundation said.

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Infants would get biometric digital ID at birth or during routine immunization

Rectenwald told The Defender that behind the Gates Foundation rhetoric, digital ID extended to the poor could mean everyone without a digital ID would be unable to participate in society.

"The demand for total 'inclusion' means there will be no escape from the digital surveillance afforded by the MOSIP digital identity system," Rectenwald said. "One of the most disturbing elements of MOSIP is its objective of providing infants with a portable, biometrically linked digital ID" at birth or during routine immunization.

MOSIP is aligned with several of the U.N.'s SDGs, including Target 16.9, which calls for the provision of a digital legal identity for all — including newborns — by 2030.

While some claim MOSIP "has been built as a digital public good," for privacy advocates, the realities of such technologies do not reflect the rosy rhetoric.

Aadhaar, for instance, has already been marked by repeated concerns about its privacy and data protection.

W. Scott McCollough, an Austin-based internet and telecommunications lawyer, told The Defender, "I do not view a mandate to prove my identity as a prerequisite to exercising

basic liberties … as anything close to a 'digital public good.'"

Rectenwald said MOSIP will not lead to so-called inclusion but will advance a global surveillance state.

He told The Defender:

> "Tied to a central bank digital currency [CBDC], which is the plan, the MOSIP system will also facilitate economic surveillance and control, while excluding dissidents and other undesirables from the economy, and tracking and tracing subjects to a degree hitherto unimaginable.
>
> "Given Bill Gates' involvement and funding of MOSIP, we can be sure that beneath its philanthropic gloss lies the megalomaniac ambition for total control."

McCollough also said he's wary of Gates' involvement, describing MOSIP as "merely the latest Gates-funded mechanism to total population control. Digital ID, biometrics, CBDC all integrated into an "open" app (powered by a series of APIs) that offers the illusion of autonomy when it is instead the surrender of all self-determinacy to the digital masters."

"All the laudatory press and attention is merely more word-salad platitudes designed to lull people into voluntarily succumbing to global tyranny," he added.

"The MOSIP digital identity system could track people from cradle to grave, inclusive of their vaccine status, eventual political affiliations and even their carbon footprints, potentially including an ESG [environmental, social and governance] score for individuals," Rectenwald said.

Current rollout of MOSIP

According to the Gates Foundation, 11 countries — nine in Africa and two in Asia — "have signed memoranda of understanding with MOSIP to pilot the system," adding that "More than 90 million people have been registered for MOSIP-based IDs in the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Morocco as part of national deployments."

The Hindu reported that other countries using the technology include Burkina Faso, The Republic of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, the Togolese Republic and Uganda.

In The Philippines, "Around 70 million citizens" — 80% of the population — have enrolled, The Hindu reported, while according to The Economist, Morocco integrated an existing fingerprint database into its national MOSIP platform.

MOSIP relies on biometric data to function. The Gates Foundation cited an example from Ethiopia, "where few people had ever had their fingerprints scanned." As a result, and "To maximize inclusivity, the team gave people several options for sharing their biometric data, including scans of their fingerprints, iris, or face."

Iris scanners also were implemented in Sri Lanka and the Philippines as part of MOSIP deployments there, while in June, fingerprint scanners produced by Integrated Biometrics completed the compliance of their scanners with MOSIP for Android devices. This added to existing compliance with Microsoft Windows.

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MOSIP supported by Gates Foundation, World Bank, World Economic Forum

The Gates Foundation lauds MOSIP for its academic rather than profit-driven roots and for collaborating with global institutes like the Alan Turing Institute and Carnegie Mellon University.

Yet even without explicit corporate backing, MOSIP has received funding and support from several heavyweight organizations. The Gates Foundation, for instance, issued a $7.27 million grant to MOSIP in September 2018, and a $10 million grant in October 2021.

MOSIP also gets support from the Omidyar Network and the World Bank, including the institution's ID4D (Identification for Development) initiative, whose mission is to:

> "Harness global and cross-sectoral knowledge, World Bank financing instruments, and partnerships to help countries realize the transformational potential of identification (ID) systems, including civil registration (CR) ... [and] to enable all people to exercise their rights and access better services and economic opportunities in line with the Sustainable Development Goals."

A staff member from the World Bank sits on MOSIP's International Advisory Group, while "the largest single supporter" of ID4D — at over $50 million in funding — is the Gates Foundation.

Ernst & Young projected the digital public goods market will reach $100 billion annually, and according to Juniper Research's analysts, biometrics capabilities, including fingerprint and iris recognition, will reach 95% of smartphones globally by 2025, accounting for $3 trillion in payment transactions, up from $404 billion in 2020.

In March, Gates visited MOSIP's headquarters in Bangalore, India, "for presentations on the project's progress and plans," and discussions on the "potential of using digital identity systems to drive financial inclusion and service delivery."

In October 2019, the MOSIP team "had the pleasure of providing Gates and the team at the Gates Foundation with an update on our progress to-date."

MOSIP's leadership structure includes individuals linked to the Gates Foundation and other global organizations like the World Bank, the British military, Google and ID2020.

Himanshu Nagpal, MOSIP's deputy director of Financial Services for the Poor, also serves as deputy director of Digital Health for the Gates Foundation.

Eileen Donahoe, a member of MOSIP's international advisory group, is executive director of the Global Digital Policy Incubator at Stanford University's Cyber Policy Center, and a member of the World Economic Forum (WEF), the Council on Foreign Relations and the National Endowment for Democracy.

ID2020, founded in 2016, claims to support "ethical, privacy-protecting approaches to digital ID." Its founding partners include Microsoft, the Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, UNICEF, and the World Bank.

The Good Health Pass Collaborative — a vaccine passport collaboration also involving Mastercard and the WEF — was also supported by ID2020.

India's government is also involved with the development of MOSIP. According to The Economist, this is part of Indian President Narendra Modi's objective to turn his country's

digital public infrastructure into "an Indian Belt and Road Initiative," through which "Indian IT firms can expect bumper development and maintenance contracts."

MOSIP in May announced it is building an "ecosystem" of biometrics labs, for which it is "partnering with more universities."

The Tony Blair Institute, chaired by embattled former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, has also endorsed MOSIP and other digital ID programs. The same institute previously supported ID2020's Good Health Pass initiative.

People 'risk being shut out of society' — unless we opt out

MOSIP's developers promise "security and privacy features that will help protect the data from potential threats." According to the company, a "consent framework in the platform takes care of user privacy that lets users choose what they want to share and when."

Other proponents of digital ID have also argued such platforms allow users to have control over their own data in what is called "self-sovereign identity."

But McCollough said, "Self-sovereign identity is an illusion since your 'identity' has validity or 'currency,' only after it is recognized by the government to which we are subject."

Otherwise, individuals risk being shut out of society, McCollough said. "A person that refuses to grant digital permission soon becomes effectively canceled. Just as there was no spoon in the Matrix there is no self-sovereignty to any of this. They pretend to give you control when the next step is a demand you yield 'permission' or else."

Indeed, Aadhaar, the nationwide Indian digital ID system after which MOSIP is modeled, has been beset by privacy-related controversies.

Launched in 2009, Aadhaar eventually enrolled over 99% of all Indian adults, linking them with many public and private services, including bank accounts, electoral identity verification, income tax filings, digital payments systems, government pensions, subsidies and welfare payments — even SIM card registration.

Yet in 2017, Aadhaar generated controversy when HIV patients reported being coerced into providing their Aadhaar ID, leading many to drop out of treatment programs due to privacy concerns.

According to The Economist, "Aadhaar has performed poorly in places with bad internet connections or where manual workers have worn finger pads. The system also suffers security breaches. Experts say it is very easy to access it with false credentials or spoof fingerprints."

Nevertheless, Gates, on his personal blog, praised Aadhaar — describing it as "a valuable platform for delivering social welfare programs and other government services."

Reclaim the Net said similar concerns exist with MOSIP, arguing that "Adapting MOSIP to each nation's unique requirements means collecting and customizing vast amounts of personal data." MOSIP's 80+ vendors "raises red flags" because "the higher the number of vendors, the greater the potential access points for data breaches."

According to The Economist, "Though Aadhaar was supposed to be optional, it is hard to function without it."

Glaser told The Defender that "ID is the Achilles heel of the entire control system. If we can remove ID from their system — meaning we regain power over our own ID with the right to

opt out — then all of Achilles falls."

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