

Measuring the Invisible: Data and Estimates of the Population Lacking Proof of Legal Identity

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Abstract: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in response to the challenge of multi-faceted inequalities between and within countries, calls for renewed commitment and action to “leave no one behind.” Target 16.9 specifically calls for “providing legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030.” However, formal quantification and socio-demographic description of the population lacking legal identity is difficult. The challenges entail definitional issues, data availability, data quality and technical estimation methods. In this paper, we review the World Bank Group’s country-level data and estimates of persons lacking legal identity. We begin by assessing their internal consistency and then compare these data and estimates to those from population and housing censuses and household surveys for selected countries, where data are available. We describe the notable differences between these different data sources and estimation methods, and evaluate their relative strengths and limitations. Specifically, we note the ability of censuses and multi-modal surveys, such as the State of Aadhar initiative, to identify subnational populations lacking legal identity and describe their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. We conclude by discussing how quantification and sociodemographic description of the population lacking legal identity can inform national and international efforts to strengthen inclusive legal identity systems.

Theme: Population Policy Challenges

Keywords: Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Applied demography, Comparative methods

Extended Abstract: Legal identity is acknowledged to be catalytic for achieving at least 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Further, data generated from civil registration and population registers support the measurement of over 60 Sustainable Development Goal indicators. As civil registration establishes the existence of a person under law, it has traditionally been the fundamental means of granting legal identity. Legal identity has a critical role to ensure the global community upholds its promise of leaving no one behind, as espoused in the 2030 Agenda and should be inclusive of all people from birth to death.

Legal identity is defined as the basic characteristics of an individual’s identity, e.g., name, sex, place and date of birth conferred through registration and the issuance of a certificate by an authorized civil registration authority following the occurrence of birth. In the absence of birth registration, legal identity may be conferred by a legally recognized identification authority; this system should be linked to the civil registration system to ensure a holistic approach to legal identity from birth to death. Legal identity is retired by the issuance of a death certificate by the civil registration authority upon registration of death.¹

Proof of legal identity is defined as a credential, such as birth certificate, identity card, travel document or digital identity credential that is recognized as proof of legal identity under national law and in accordance with emerging international norms and principles.²

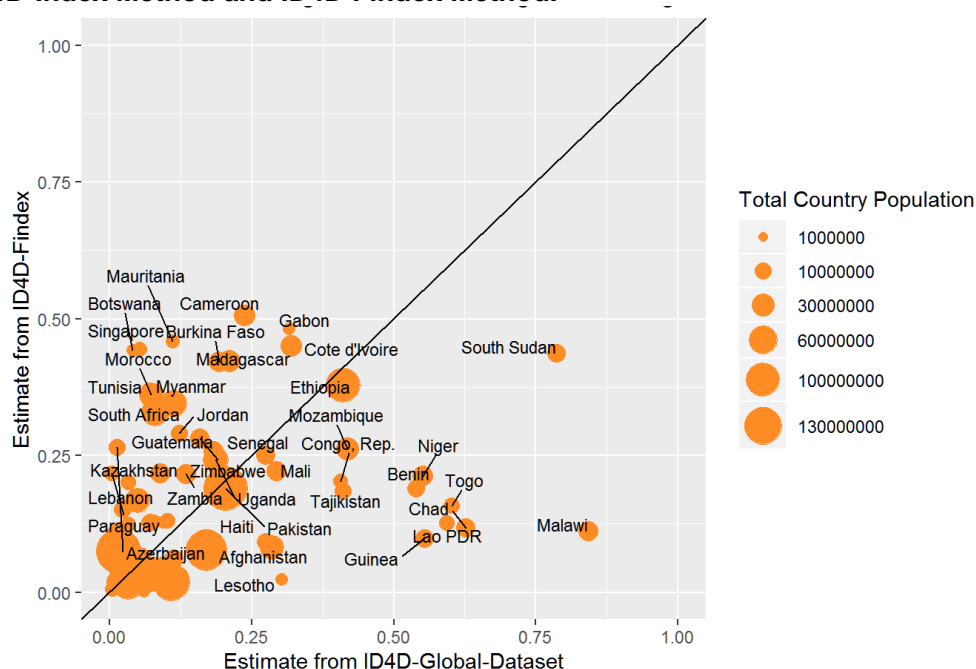
In the socio-economic sphere, persons without legal identity will generally face difficulties with entering into contractual agreements with commercial entities, experience restricted access to educational opportunities, not be able to open a bank account, enroll in a health insurance plan or

¹ United Nations operational definition of legal identity. Source: United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group

² Operational United Nations definition. Source: United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group.

qualify for grants and cash transfers.³ Proof of legal identity is increasingly a precondition for entering the work force and being enrolled as a taxpayer. In many countries even essential services such as the purchase and registration of mobile phone SIM cards is conditioned by presenting proof of legal identity.

Figure 1: Estimated Percentage of Adults Lacking Proof of Legal ID, comparison of World Bank’s ID4D-Index Method and ID4D Findex Method.



The number of individuals worldwide without legal identity is certainly considerable, taking into account the lack of universal coverage of civil registration systems in a number of countries. Based on different approaches, the number of people without legal identity varies. For example, according to the World Bank’s most recent estimates, approximately 1.1 billion people around the world – half of whom are in Africa – lack legal identification to prove who they are.⁴ This is an important statistic, yet the current data and estimation methods do not provide consistent estimates that can easily inform country-based programmatic efforts to serve this population.

In particular, the WBG approach uses two inputs: (1) latest available survey data from MICS/DHS surveys to estimate the number of children that lack legal identity; and (2) national voter registration data, compared with the official UN World Population Prospects (WPP) projections for the country, to estimate the same for the adult population.

While both inputs provide useful information for estimating the population that lacks legal identity, they have limitations. First, they do not cover the whole age range of people likely to be without legal identity. Children aged 5 - 17 years, for example, are missed by both data sources. Second, the use of estimates of birth certification coverage from MICS/DHS surveys as a proxy for the number of children without legal identity implicitly equates legal identity with provenance of a birth certificate, which is not aligned with the working definition of legal identity agreed by the UN and WBG. Third,

³ Lucia Gonzalez Lopez, Tanja Brøndsted, Sejersen, Nicholas Oakeshott, Gaspar Fajth, Taimur Khilji and Nicoleta Panta, “Civil Registration, Human Rights, and Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific,” Asia Pacific Population Journal, Vol. 29, No. 1 (November 2014), p. 77, accessed online at: <http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/APPJ-Vol-29-No-1.pdf>

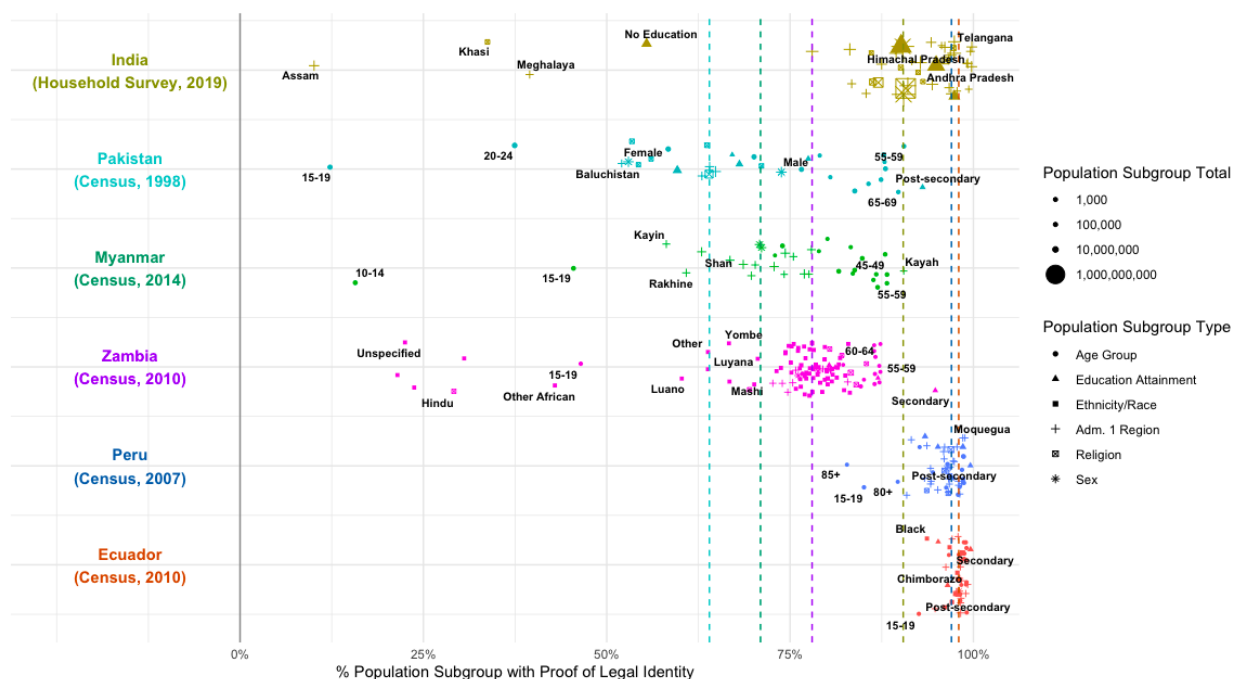
⁴ : World Bank. 2019. Global ID Coverage, Barriers, and Use by the Numbers: An In-Depth Look at the 2017 ID4D-Findex Survey.

Figure 2 compares World Bank estimates with census and survey estimates of persons lacking proof of legal identity for our 6 focus countries. We observe notable inconsistency between the World Bank’s ID4D-Findex estimates and census/survey estimates for countries where the estimate of persons lacking proof of legal identity exceeds 20% of the national resident population. In the case of Zambia, the 2010 census-based estimates of persons with proof of legal identity are notably higher than those derived using the World Bank ID4D Index method. This suggests notable limitations in the use of voter registration data as a proxy for proof of legal identity for the adult population.

We examine subnational differentials in estimates of persons with proof of legal identity using available census and survey data, in Figure 3. This highlights the considerable disparities in proof of legal identity by social, economic, demographic and geographic characteristics in India, Pakistan Myanmar and Zambia. It also further points to a chronic limitation of World Bank ID4D-Index and ID4D-Findex estimates – their inability to be sub-nationally disaggregated by multiple geographic, demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

Figure 3: Percentage of Population with Proof of Legal Identity by Population Subgroups, Various Countries, 1998-2019

Percentage of Population with Proof of Legal Identity by Population Subgroup, Various Countries (1998-2019)



In the remainder of the paper, we further investigate the plausibility of the underlying assumptions of the World Bank’s ID4D-Index estimates – specifically assumptions about the nature of recent trends in birth registration completeness. We also evaluate the external consistency between successive survey rounds in India and successive censuses in Zambia, to examine short- and medium temporal changes in the population lacking proof of legal identity.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the relative strengths and limitations of different data sources to measure proof of legal identity at the population level within and between countries. We also discuss the potential implications of this analysis for the 2020 round of population and housing censuses and the next wave of Demographic and Health Surveys and Unicef Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. Our analysis and discussion is designed to inform ongoing efforts by demographers and policy makers in monitoring and evaluating progress towards SDG Goal 16.9 of “legal identity for all by 2030.