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The effects of media narratives on national identity cards system strategies of Malawi

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of how online media narratives shaped national identity cards system strategies. The case of Malawi was analysed as an example of an African country that recently implemented a national identity cards system. The study used Narratives Theory to analyse how narratives presented in government policies, legal documents, and online media reports influenced the implementation of the national identity cards system. The results showed that the events involving illegal immigrants, child trafficking, access to public health services, and challenges with voter registration influenced the implementation of the national identity cards system. Contextual conditions, including lack of financial resources, porous borders, culture, no-fee services in public health facilities, and the absence of a computerised identification system gave rise to the events. Lack of financial resources and focus on other government priorities delayed the implementation of national identity cards systems. The study contributed towards literature on national identity cards systems in the context of Africa.

Keywords: National identity cards system, Narrative Theory, Online media, Malawi.

1. Introduction

Countries across the globe continue to prioritise on national identification systems that support governments to identify and register individuals in their countries (Arora, 2008; Gelb & Clark, 2013). One example of such national identification systems is biometric identity cards. There is a large body of literature on national identity cards emerging from diverse disciplines that have addressed different issues related to motivation for identity cards (Arora, 2008; Greenleaf, 2010) and electronic identity management (Beynon-Davies, 2006; Goodstadt, Connolly & Bannister, 2015; Greenleaf, 2010; Kanashiro & Doneda, 2012). However, studies on national identity card systems in context of African countries has not received much attention among scholars. There is a small but growing literature on the subject (see Adepoju, 2002; Breckenridge, 2005; Donovan, 2015; Uzoka & Ndzinge, 2009). Part of the reasons is that most African countries have implemented national identity card systems to support their socio-economic activities (Adjei, 2011; Lyon, 2010).

There are few countries in Africa without national identity cards e.g. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia (see Donovan, 2015; Gelb & Clarke, 2013; WPF, 2017; WB, 2017). Malawi is one example of an African country that recently implemented a national identity card system (Gheorghe, Straehler-Pohl, Nkhoma et al., 2019). Previous attempts to implement national identity cards system (since 1999) did not yield successful results. To the knowledge of the author, there are few academic studies (with exception of Gelb & Clarke, 2013) that have tried to understand the process of implementing the national identity cards in the context of Malawi. While other studies mention passing the use of a national identity system in the country (See Gheorghe, Straehler-Pohl, Nkhoma et al., 2019; Makoza, 2015). This paper analysed how online media narratives influenced policies related to the implementation of national identity cards.

Online media forms part of the social construction of reality through the creation and reinforcement of meaning that people assign to their experiences, events and activities (Gergen, 2018; Rai, Chatterjee & Sarker, 2011). The news reported online affect different stakeholders in the way they think and act about a particular social issue (Jones & McBeth, 2010). In addition, stories published online carry narratives that highlight issues that affect society. The narratives influence the way the government and those in authority frame policies to address social challenges (de Vreese, 2005).

Against this backdrop, the study analysed the media narratives published online on national identity cards and attempted to answer the following research questions (RQ): RQ1: What are the primary focus of online media narratives on the national identity cards system? RQ2: How do the online media narratives influence the introduction of national identity cards system? To answer these questions, the study employed the concepts of Narrative Theory (Ellway & Walsham, 2015; Pentland, 1995) to interrogate online media reports on the national identity system of Malawi. The narratives highlight the explanation of underlying issues that supported the framing of public policies related to the national identity cards system (Hedstrom & Ylikoski, 2010; Jones & McBerth, 2010).

The rest of the paper is presented as follows. Section 2 summarises the background of the study. Section 3 outlines the theory informing the study. Section 4 highlights the

methodology. This is followed by a summary of the findings. Section 6 discusses the results. Section 7 summarises conclusions drawn from the study.

2. Background to the study

Identification of humans has been widely studied in many disciplines and has many descriptions in literature. Clarke (1994) defines human identification as data associated with a particular human being. This definition is associated with the means of identifying individuals based on appearance, social behavior, names, knowledge, tokens, biodynamics, and imposed physical characteristics (Arora, 2008b). Another perspective on identification is the individual's distinct characteristics derived from behavior, values, and emotions, which govern social interactions. Identification can also relate to the collective vision of a group, expressed through self-perception and group membership (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2014). Thus, identification is related to individuals, organisations and society. Table 1 summarises means of identification and examples of artifacts that can be used to identify individuals or groups.

Table 1: Summary of identification example (Arora, 2008; Clarke, 1994)

Means of identification	Description	Examples
Appearance	How a person look	Photographs on identify document biometrics
Social behaviour	How the person interact with others	Education records, mobile phone, credit cards statement, video surveillance data
Names/Codes	What the person a called by other people or by an organisation	Listed names in registry, passport, birth certificates, ID cards number, passwords, PIN
Tokens	What the person has	Smart cards, secure ID cards
Biodynamics	What a person does or is	Most forms of biometric finger prints, iris, retina etc.
Imposed physical characteristics	What the person is now	Height, weight

Identity is also related to nationality, where citizens of the same country share a common culture and language (Arora, 2008). There are different types of identities that can be classified based on the immigration laws of a country. These have been incorporated into identification documents that can be used to identify individuals and their citizenship and allegiance. To achieve this, registration is required, where different types of data are collected and recorded. The output of the registration may be identification documents such as certificates, passports, and national identity cards. Government departments or other organisations (depending on the laws of the country) issue national identity documents. Table 2 summarizes the systems and data used for the identification of individuals.

Table 2: Summary of systems that use nation identity cards system

Systems	Application or use	Example of data used
National security systems	Combating crimes	National ID cards, passport & drivers' licence
Finance systems	Combating money laundering and supporting Know Your Customer	Signature or electronic signatures
Immigration/Transport systems	Identification of person or nationality during travel	Passport or Drivers licence
Taxation systems	Identification of individuals and organisations paying/remitting taxes	Social Security Number or Tax Number
Registration systems	Identifying individual or organisations	Birth or Death Certificates and Business registration Certificates
Electoral systems	Identification of eligible voters or maintaining voters rolls	Personal Voter Cards
Social systems	Identification of beneficiaries in safety nets programs	Birth certificates and National ID cards
Health care systems	Identification of healthcare consumers	Birth or Death Certificates or National ID cards
Education systems	School registration and access to education loans	National ID cards

Electronic-based information systems (IS) provide robust platforms for the identification of individuals. Electronic-based IS identification systems support the effective capture, processing, and storage of identification data that can be accessed by different stakeholders across economic sectors (Gelb & Clark, 2013). However, the application of electronic-based IS-based technologies has potential risks, e.g., surveillance, security breaches, and loss of privacy if systems are compromised (Halperin & Backhouse, 2012). Hence, risk mitigation strategies should be put in place to safeguard the data. Examples of forms of data that can be used in electronic-based information system identification systems include:

- **Biometrics:** identification of individuals using a person's face, finger prints, and iris
- **Electronic databases:** storage of identification data instead of using manual records or paper-based systems
- **Electronic credentials:** identification cards used to identify individuals and information about them, e.g., health records and social security number
- **Mobile, online, and offline:** identification systems used in finance, health, and social services, e.g., banks, health records, and social security

The electronic-based identification systems, such as iris and facial identification, biometrics, databases, and networks, are useful in supporting the identification of individuals. The national identification systems stand to benefit from the electronic-based identification systems. In turn, the identification systems can support the functions of other private and

public systems (Krivonosova, 2017; Tsap, Vappel & Draheim, 2017; Whitley, Gal & Kjaergaard, 2014).

3. Summary of Narrative Theory informing the study

People can generate narratives on National identity cards from different perspectives leading to the social construction of reality (Boyce, 1996; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Narratives or stories support the sense-making of events, confirming shared meaning and supporting agents to act. The study explored the concept of narratives to explain the stories related to national identity cards. Narratives, in this context, are a set of events and actions that embodies coherent or unity of purpose (Abell, 2004). There are four levels of narratives that can support the understanding of meaning and values to events and actions (Ellway & Walsham, 2015; Pentland, 1999). The levels include text, stories, fabula and generating mechanisms summarised as follows:

- **Text:** generated from stories that individuals explain about events or objects.
- **Stories:** version of the description of events or objects from a particular point of view
- **Fabula:** description of events or object and their relationships.
- **Generative mechanisms:** the underlying contextual conditions that enable or constrain the description of an event or object.

Narratives provide a means of understanding insights into a problem, telling a story and the true underlying patterns of events and processes (Pentland, 1995). Narratives have dimensions or features that can be used to understand processes in a social system. The features of narratives include a sequence of time, focal actors, identifiable voice, canonical frames and context. Thus, narratives can highlight the time when the event occurred and the actors or objects in the story (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Narratives also outline identifiable voices in the story that tells the story. Narratives may carry the meaning and cultural values of the teller or the audience of a story. They also indicate the context of a story which summarises the location in which a story happened (Abell, 2004; Pentland, 1995). Table 3 summarises the constructs in narratives.

Table 3: Summary of levels of narratives (Adapted from: Pentland, 1995)

Level	Definition	Guiding question(s)
Text	Particular telling of a story by a specific narrator	Actual text of stories: what are the stories from the national identity cards stakeholders from?
Story	Versions of a fabula from a specific point of view	Versions of the stories: What the specific point of views on national identity cards? Which stakeholders are privileged or silenced?
Fabula	Generic description of a particular set of events and their relationships	How events occurred: What happened and who did what?
Generating mechanisms	Underlying context conditions that enable or constrain the fabula	The process of national identity cards system: what were causal conditions the led to policy responses on national identity cards system?

Louchart and Aylett (2004) suggested that narratives in text form represent discourses and sources. The stories relate to events and existence. The events are actions and happenings of a particular story. Existence indicates the characters in the story and the context of the story (Louchart 2004). Generating mechanisms are closely related to events and provide an explanation for social structures (contextual conditions) that support or limit the causes of events happening. As summarised in Table 1, we attempted to appropriate the concepts of text, story, fabula and generating mechanisms. This was done through formulating guiding questions applied in the context of national identity.

4. Research methodology

The study used qualitative research approach (Klein & Myers, 1999). The assumption was that online media supports the construction of reality (Gergen, 2018). Others have argued that narratives and stories play a part in people's lives and sense-making of events, objects and actions that they take (Pentland, 1995). The objective of the study was to analyse the online media narratives on national identity cards system and understand how the narratives influenced strategies for the implementation of the national identity cards system. This was consistent with studies that have analysed secondary data to understand issues that affect the implementation of electronic systems that support activities of government in delivering public services (e.g. Anthopoulos, Reddick, Giannakidou & Mavridis, 2016; Beynon-Davies, 2011).

4.1. Case description: Malawi

Malawi is a former British colony located in Southern Africa. It gained its independence in 1964 and was a one party state for about 30 years. The country changed to multiparty democracy in 1993. The majority of the people (about 90%) live in rural areas engage in subsistence farming for their livelihood. The country's economy depend on seasonal rain-fed Agriculture and some foreign earning crops include tobacco, tea, coffee and groundnuts. Over the years trade on Agriculture produce has declined and the anti-smoking lobby on tobacco has affected the foreign earnings. The country's population is also increasing at a rapid pace (e.g., from 13.5 million in 2006 to 16.9 million in 2016) (WB, 2019). The population boom is putting a strain on limited resources of the environment (e.g. water, vegetation and land), infrastructures (e.g. roads, housing, energy) and public services (e.g. health, education and social services). The low literacy levels, high unemployment rate among the youth and environmental degradation subject many households and individuals to poverty and vulnerability.

The Government of Malawi is also confronted with inadequate financial resources and a small tax-base for revenue generation. Hence, the national budget depends on donor support (about 60%) and high interest rate loans from international financial lending institutions. The country is classified in the category of very low-income economies. To address some of these challenges, national identity cards system is perceived to the solution that can help the government in planning, enhancing financial management of limited resources, minimise financial fraud and improved public identification and security. The new identification system would replace use of passports, drivers license and voter registration cards and local chiefs' letters to identify citizens (WB, 2017).

4.2. Data collection

The study used online line media reports sources from online news websites. Search terms “National identity” “National ID”, “National ID cards”, “National Registration”, “ID cards” and “Malawi ID cards” were used to search the online news websites. The search yielded 39 articles. Table 4 summarises the data used in the study.

Table 4: Summary of data used in the study

Category	Website	Source	# Of articles
Online news	Daily Times Malawi	http://timesmediamw.com	10
	Malawi Voice	http://malawivoice.com	2
	Nation Online	http://mwnation.com	11
	Nyasatimes	http://www.nyasatimes.com	12
	Voice of America	http://www.voanews.com	2
	Zodiak Malawi	http://www.zodiakmalawi.com	2
Documents	National Registration Act 2010	National Archives Department	1
	Marriage, Divorce and family relations Act 2014	National Archives Department	1
TOTAL			41

As illustrated in Table 4, copies of legislations related to national identification were sourced from Government Departments. The copies of the legislations were included to gain historical perspectives on the phenomenon. The timeline of the data was between 2006 and 2015.

4.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the policy documents and online media reports (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Data was read and reread to note the initial ideas and important points. Codes were generated based on the initial ideas. The codes were searched in the data and assigned to the pieces of text. Themes were revised to generate a thematic map. The themes were defined in the line with the story line and a report was produced. The process was iterative where the steps were repeated. Qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti) was used to manage the data during the process. Constructs from Narrative Theory (Pentland, 1999) were used as sensitising devices in the data analysis process (Klein & Myers, 1999).

5. Research findings

This section summarises the findings of analysing media reports and documents on national identity cards. From the text, patterns of stories and events were identified. To understand the stories, it felt necessary to establish who was speaking or silent or represented and reported. This was followed by stories that focused on highlighting key issues affecting the implementation of national identity cards. Finally, the contextual conditions that gave rise to the events were also highlighted.

5.1. Stakeholders in the reports

A total of 14 stakeholders were identified in the corpus, and each group represented or reported different interests. The stakeholders included the state president, law enforcement officials, politicians, citizens, government officials, government hospitals, local chiefs, NGOs, international development agencies, illegal immigrants, private sector organisations, external contractors, and children. All the stakeholders or institutions were directly or indirectly affected by the potential introduction of national identity cards system.

The state President was interested in the introduction of national identity cards to ensure that there was effective planning in public services and implement policies that could reinforce the introduction of the national identity cards system in the country. Law enforcement agencies were interested in national identity cards to support the identification of individuals who were citizens of the country and prevent illegal immigrants from crossing borders. Politicians were interested in the national identity cards to ensure that policies and laws that were necessary for the government to enforce registration of citizens were present in the country. Figure 1 summarises the stakeholders and their interests.

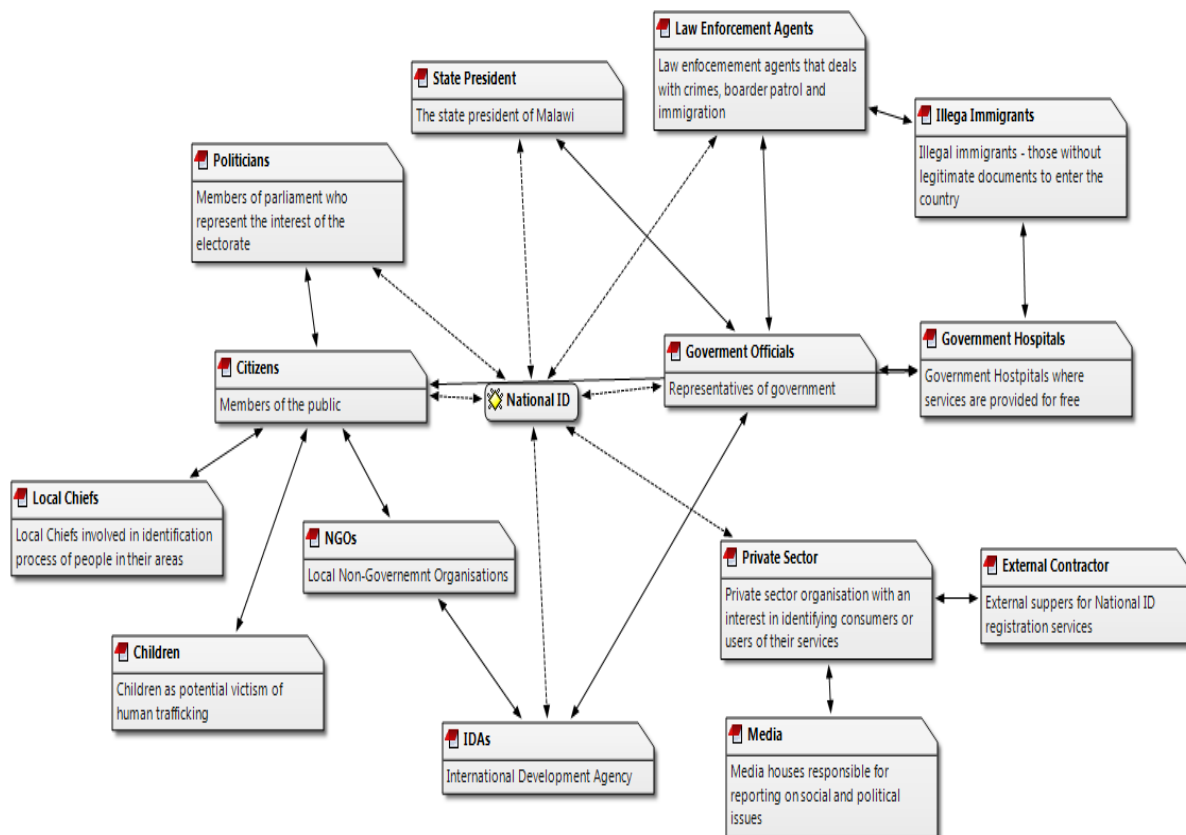


Figure 1: Summary of the national identity cards stakeholders

Government officials were interested in national identity cards for planning purposes for the delivery of public services. Government hospitals required national identity cards to ensure that the right people were identified when receiving healthcare services. Citizens were

interested in national identity cards to use them in accessing services in public and financial organisations. Local chiefs perceived that national identity cards would assist in recording people in their villages. NGOs were interested in national identity cards to support the protection of people in their communities from exploitation and human trafficking. International development agencies were interested in national identity to support the implementation of the registration systems and to have information that could be used in planning for development programs. Children were part of the vulnerable members of society that required identification to avoid exploitation and human trafficking. Illegal immigrants were people who were coming from other countries and entering the country's borders without legitimate travel documents.

Some of the identified stakeholders of national identity cards system contributed to the media reports. For instance, government officials, NGOs, politicians, local chiefs and international development agencies contributed to the discussions on the benefits and issues of the national identity cards system. However, despite being highlighted as stakeholders in the debates, comments from the illegal immigrants and children were silent in the corpus. This could be attributed to the fact that the media houses did not have access to the two groups of stakeholders.

5.2. Key stories reported in the media

Key stories in the media reports were mainly challenges the country was facing because of the absence of national identity cards systems. There was a strong belief among some of the stakeholders that national identity could address the challenges. Hence, the need for the government to initiate the implementation of a national identity cards system. The stories are summarised in the subsequent subsections.

5.2.1. Events reported in the media (Fabula)

Event triggers were related to illegal immigrants, child trafficking, public health services access and effect of voter's rolls during elections. The country had limited human capacity and financial resources to effectively patrol the borders. The law enforcement agencies had a limited presence at the borders, and illegal immigrants took advantage of the situation. The illegal immigrants used uncharted routes to enter the country without any formal identification or travel documents. As a result, there was an influx of illegal immigrants and human trafficking activities as the illegal immigrants were using the country as a transit route because of the limited capacity of law enforcement to patrol the country's borders.

“Police in Malawi’s commercial capital Blantyre are intensifying their sweeping exercise which seeks to flush out illegal immigrants who are flocking the city.(...) the police have so far rounded up 40 illegal immigrants mostly from Pakistan and India since the start of the exercise on Tuesday and are expected to be taken to court to answer charges of illegal entry. We have discovered that many of them have stayed in the country for quite a long time and are being kept by Malawians in their respect homes and working shops yet they don’t have valid stay or work permits” The influx of the illegal immigrants on ‘porous border entries’ which are allow the immigrants pass, thorough containers carried by trucks without much security. Many people are partly blaming the influx of illegal immigrants on the absence of national identity documents which they say would easily differentiate between Malawi citizens and illegal immigrants.” (NT300113)

Child trafficking was another challenge that the country was facing. People in rural communities were engaged in child trafficking because of poverty, where they were not able to provide food, clothing and other materials to their young children. Selling young children became an alternative for generating money to meet their needs. In some cases, young girls were forced into early marriages in exchange for bride price or dowry. Often the children were sold in secret, and those who bought them travelled with the children using uncharted routes to sell the children to neighbouring countries for child labour. In some cases, child traffickers also bribed law enforcement agents when they were caught.

“NGO Gender Coordination Network (NGOGCN) Child Rights Permanent Committee chairperson, Mr Y. disclosed this during a media briefing in Lilongwe on Thursday. Mr Y explained that his committee is concerned with continued cases of child labour, child trafficking, child marriages, child prostitution as well as increased number of street children. He attributed the development to lack of relevant laws in the country as well as the soft penalties meted out to offenders. While acknowledging the efforts from different stakeholders to address the challenge of child rights violations, the committee said there is still need for intensify the fight against the vice. “We request the Ministry of Gender, Disability and Child Development to present to Parliament the Family Relations Bill, Marriage and Divorce Bill and Trafficking in Person’s Bill for speedy enactment,” said Mr Y. He condemned parents and guardians who tolerate some of the violations against their children. “We still have situations whereby parents or guardians marry off their children or force them into child labour or expose them to trafficking”. (...). “Would like to call upon government and Members of Parliament for more efforts and resource allocation towards all programmes targeting children including the enforcement of Child Care, Protection and Justice and the National Registration Acts.” (DT012615)

Government health facilities (e.g. hospitals and clinics) offer free public healthcare services to the citizens. Basic healthcare services are offered to the citizens without any cost and in some cases, special services can be acquired at a cost in most of the government hospitals. The free healthcare services have also attracted people from neighbouring countries where they crossed the border into the country to access the healthcare services without paying for the services. This had put a burden on the cost of running the healthcare services, especially in district hospitals that are close to the borders of (a) Zambia e.g. Mchinji district in the central region (b) Mozambique e.g. Dedza district in the central region; and Mulanje district in the southern region.

“Health authorities say the absence of national IDs is putting strain on medical resources because foreigners come to take advantage of free medical services in public hospitals, particularly in border districts. “Last year, we did a survey at the [Dedza district] hospital,” said Mr Z, spokesperson for Dedza District Health Office which borders Mozambique in central Malawi. “We found that almost half of our in-patients were Mozambicans. So when we asked them, they told us that they are coming from Malawian villages bordering Mozambique... So, if the IDs are introduced in Malawi we will be able to trace which one are Malawians are which ones are Mozambicans.” Mr Z says the hospital’s budget for medical supplies has always failed to meet the demand” (VO031014)

The country conducts elections regularly to elect the president of the country, members of parliament, and local councillors. The process involved the recreation of the voters' roll to ensure that only eligible voters are registered to participate in the elections. However, lack of

identification created problems where the process of registering voters was repeated. Lack of identification documents also creates problems because some voters registered more than once, making the voters' roll inaccurate.

Another issue was the creation of the electoral roll. The Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) was using a manual system to record the personal information of all eligible voters during elections. There were challenges in verifying and identifying multiple registrations because of the absence of national identity cards. Alternative methods of identification documents were used, e.g., driver's license, passport, work identity documents, and letters from the church or village chiefs. However, these were not effective in addressing false identification and multiple registrations. Each time there was an election, there were opinions that the introduction of national identity cards would improve the electoral processes for identification and verification of voters and eliminate the process of recreating the voters' roll.

“The people of Malawi spoke up in 2006, during the constitutional conference, and decided that an overhaul of its electoral systems was needed. “Almost seven years and two elections later, their wishes have not come to pass. Priority must now be placed on reforms and whoever ends up at the helm after May 20th elections must commit to fulfilling these aspirations and focus on meaningful reform of the electoral system so that good governance and democracy can be consolidated,”... lack of public confidence in the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) due to the dominance of the executive which controls the appointments and dismissals of the Commissioners. MEC’s track record of managing elections whereby it observes that irregularities and logistical problems continue to undermine its credibility. “The debate for an overhaul of the voters’ roll remains unresolved, which could magnify the current perception that the MEC is unable to provide a level political playing field for opposition candidates,”. It also calls upon all candidates to focus on calling for the creation of a new voters’ roll as a priority for future elections in Malawi and asks MEC to work closely with the National Registration Bureau in its future projections on registration and confirmation of the voters’ roll once reforms have been enacted.” (DT280314)

From the examples of the events, each time they occurred the issue of national identity cards emerged from the narratives. A national identity cards system was perceived to be a solution that could minimise some of the challenges related to illegal immigrants passing through the porous borders of the country. Further, national identity cards could be used to check individuals accessing services at health facilities and during the voter registration exercise when preparing for the elections. The national identity cards could also be used in the Banking sector to identify and verify people accessing banking services. The government departments were also optimistic that the introduction of national identity cards would address the problem of ghost workers where the national identity cards could be used to verify the members of civil service. Figure 2 summarises the event triggers that initiated the debates around national identity cards system.

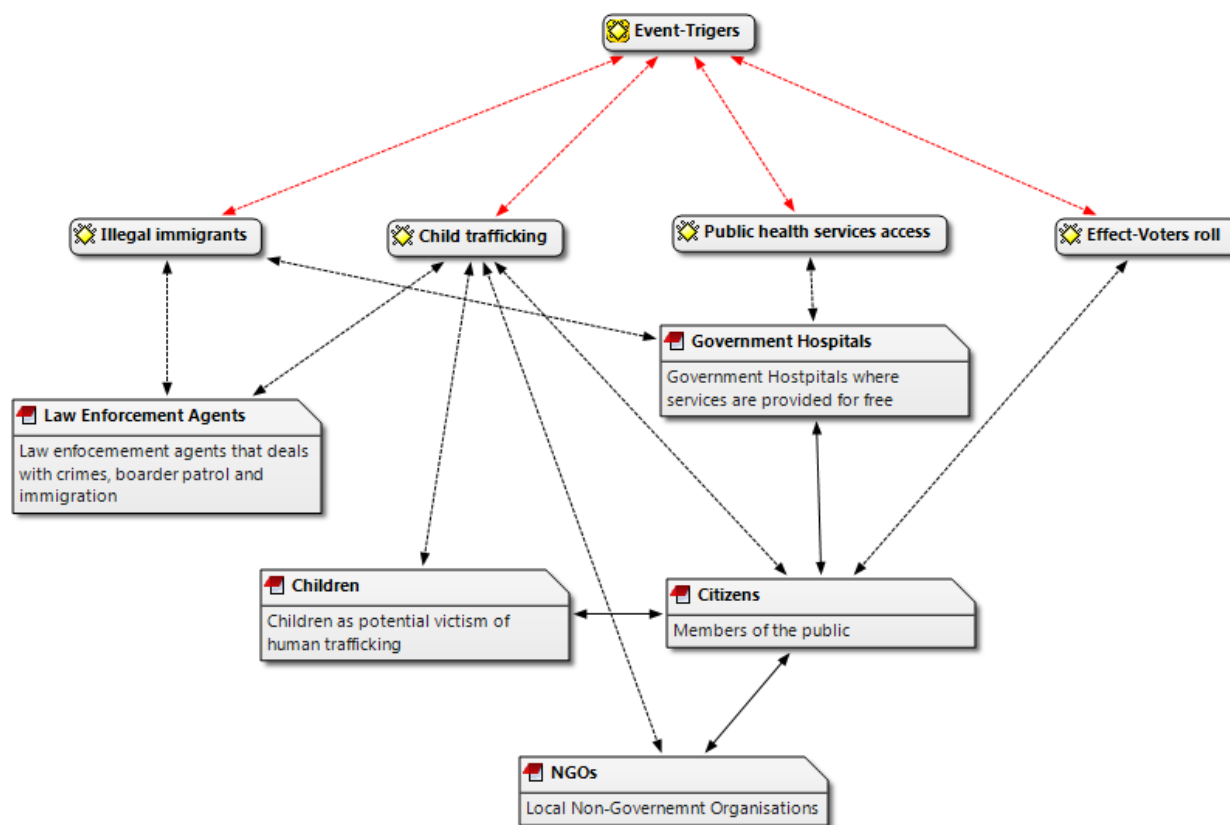


Figure 2: Summary of event triggers

5.2.2. Generative mechanisms

As a developing country, the country did not have adequate financial resources to support border controls, provide free healthcare services to citizens of neighbouring countries, and effectively record and identify citizens using modern technologies. The lack of financial resources was the main constraint that led to the delays in the implementation of the national identity cards system in Malawi. The country could not mobilise financial resources locally and fund the national identity system program. The government relied on support from external donors to implement the national identity cards system.

“Malawi does not have national IDs and the project’s fate, according to government will be known in February when parliamentarians meet for the mid-term budget review meeting. It has been observed that the country is far from having proper identification documents as the National Registration Bureau (NRB) needs over K2 billion to implement the programme” (NM041114).

The statement above may mean that implementation of public programs required strategies for mobilising local resources to fund the programs. The dependence on external donors to

fund public programs created a culture where the government could not set its priorities and implement programs that would transform the country and improve the delivery of services to the citizens. In probing further, the issue of government priority on the national identity cards system, the findings showed that some members of political leadership did not prioritise the national identity cards systems program. The politicians were responsible for setting a budget and debating it in parliament. Their lack of interest in the national identity cards system means that the program could not be debated and allocated resources for implementation. The following statement highlights the lack of interest in the national identity cards system implementation among politicians.

“People in the country including political parties have failed to push for the production of national Identity cards (IDs). “We are not really pushing for the implementation of the programme. This has been the case largely because many people have not travelled and appreciated how other countries are benefitting from the national IDs. “As Members of Parliament, we take what our constituents tell us to say in the house and the national ID issue has not been prominent. The citizenry has a lot of work to do in pushing for the national identification programme,” (...) The production of national IDs is a forgotten but very important issue. “It is the issue that people forget about and after some time they decide to talk about. Everybody including the civil society, political parties and even the media do not consider it as a very important issue, but we need to push for it,”
(DT300814)

The statement above also indicates that other stakeholders did not show interest in the implementation of the national identity cards system. The stakeholders include civil society organisations and the media. This may mean that civil society organisations and the media were also responsible for supporting the implementation of the national identity cards system. Their roles were to promote and raise awareness among the citizens and other interested parties.

“Mr P questioned government’s seriousness on the program saying the National Registration Bureau fails to update the nation on the progress of the exercise thereby making people lose interest. “Frankly speaking the program has lost all the hype that it had when it was being introduced because overtime the government has been silent on the matter, it has not given the nation any updates on the progress of the exercise. It is that reluctance by authorities that de-motivates people from taking part,” Kanjira said. “For instance nobody knows how the cards will look like, in my view by now there should be a good number of people who registered at their villages whose identity cards would have been out for people to sample them out and perhaps in turn be encouraged to take part in order to have one of their own,” he added. (DT120514)

Awareness of the programs would provide the citizens with basic information about the program and the requirements for obtaining the national identity cards. The absence of information means that citizens may not know the benefits of the national identity cards system and may be resistant from the beneficiaries of the national identity cards system. This would increase the challenges that the country was experiencing because of the absence of a national identity cards system.

5.2.3. Outcomes

The recurring events related to the national identity cards system compelled government and development partners to initiate some of the processes and policy programs. The events were mainly related to illegal immigrants, child trafficking, health services access and voter registration during parliamentary, presidential and by-elections. Some of the notable processes were the passing of laws, the introduction of regulations and the establishment of institutions that would support national identity systems. Table 5 summarises the outcomes of the events related to national identity cards system.

Table 5: Summary of outcomes of events

Outcomes	Description
Enacting laws	National Registration Act of 2010
	Marriage, Divorce and Family relations Act of 2015
	Children care, protection and justice Act of 2014
	Trafficking in Persons Act 2015
Institutions	Establishing National Registration Bureau
	Collaboration between Government Departments with International development agencies e.g. UNICEF, UNDP
Regulations	Recognition of national identity cards in:
	• Voter registration during elections
	• Banks for Know Your Customer compliance
	• Identification of social services beneficiaries

As summarised in Table 5, some laws were enacted to respond to challenges related to the national identity system. Marriage, Divorce and family relations Act of 2015 and Child care, protection and justice of 2014 were enacted to support the protection of children from child trafficking and the culture of parents selling their children into forced labour and early marriages. National Registration Act of 2010 proposed the establishment of National Registration Bureau to initiate the process of developing and implementing a national identity cards system and record births, deaths and marriages. Further, there was collaboration between government departments and development agencies (e.g., UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP) in supporting and planning for the national identity cards system. Because there was no formalised national identity cards system, the development agencies supported the government in an interim system for civil registration and vital statistics system. There were also plans to implement regulations on recognition of the national identity cards system and to be incorporated in the processes for Know Your Customer compliance in Banks, identification of individuals during voter registration and identifying beneficiaries of social services.

6. Discussion of findings

We recall the research questions guiding the study. RQ1: What are the primary focus of online media narratives on national identity cards system? RQ2: How do the online media narratives influence the introduction to the national identity cards system? The findings demonstrated

that stories around the national identity cards system attracted the attention of many stakeholders including the state president, law enforcement agents, politicians, government officials, international development agencies, local NGOs, local chiefs, private sector organisations and external contractors. Further, the findings showed that the primary focus of media narratives on the national identity cards system was on challenges that were happening in the country because of the absence of a national identity cards system. The stories were focused on illegal immigrants, child trafficking, access to public health services and the effects of voters' roll during elections. There was a strong belief that implementation of the national identity cards system could mitigate some of the challenges. To some extent, the findings related to the benefits of national identity cards system were consistent with previous studies (Gelb & Clark, 2013; Tsap, Vappel & Draheim, 2017; Whitley, Gal & Kjaergaard, 2014). The study also highlighted the contextual issues of the country that were affecting the implementation of the national identity cards system. These were a lack of financial resources, political leadership, limited interest among the stakeholders and lack of awareness about the national identity cards system.

The media narratives influenced the government to make decisions and actions that laid the foundation for the implementation of national id card systems. It was interesting to note there was attention from government and stakeholders when events were reported in the media e.g. about illegal immigrants entering the borders of the country, incidents of child traffic, access to public health services by citizens from neighbouring countries and lack of identification during voter registration. These events, in a way, compelled the government to initiate some of the processes for implementing a national identity cards system in the country. One such effort was the passing of the national budget with funds allocated to the national identity cards system program. However, at times the events did not always lead to the initial implementation of the national identity cards system. The initial activities were not executed due lack of financial resources and lack of prioritising the program from the government. Other studies have identified cost as one of the key success factors when implementing national identity card systems (Beynon-Davies, 2006; Rawat & Morris, 2019; Tsap, Pappel & Draheim, 2017). Thus, the government needed to find ways of mobilising local resources to fund the national identity cards system implementation and operations rather than relying on donor support.

From the theoretical perspective, we attempt to understand the underlying contextual conditions that influenced events on the national identity cards system. From the findings, we identified four contextual conditions that gave rise to the issues that triggered the narratives on the national identity cards system. These were porous borders and limited security; bribery or corruption at the borders and cultural practices in rural communities, no fee services in health facilities and low security in the borders; and no means of identification and manual systems of identification. Figure 3 summarises the emerging conceptual framework from the study.

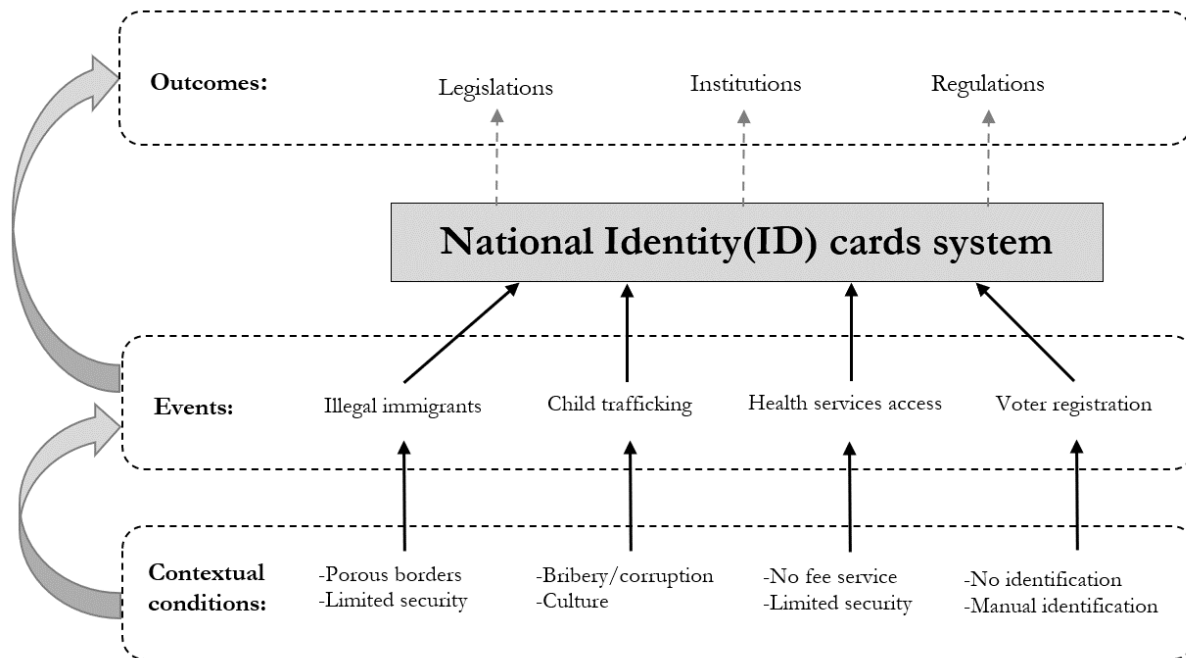


Figure 3: Summary of emerging conceptual framework

The constructs of emerging constructs and assumptions are summarised as follows:

- **Porous borders:** are borderlands between two countries that are not secure where people and goods can be transported without checks by law enforcement agencies (Isoke, 2015; Nkhoma, 2014; Tambulasi, 2009). The findings showed that the country could not monitor all areas of the borders. This can be attributed to the few personnel within law enforcement agencies. Consequently, the conditions gave rise to the illegal entry of persons without any form of identification. Cases of human trafficking were also reported because of the porous borders. Other studies have shown that one reason for initiating national identity cards is to address porous borders (Isoke, 2015).
- **Bribery:** are offers that are made to officials for persuasion to obtain favours when accessing services (Tambulasi, 2019; Isoke, 2015). Bribery of law enforcement personnel at the borders was one of the reasons that child trafficking was thriving. The rural culture was where parents sold their children for labour or early marriage in exchange for cash or dowry. The children were also being trafficked to other parts of the country or neighbouring countries.
- **No-fee service:** were health services that were accessed in public hospitals where citizens were not required to pay (Nkoma, 2014; Mussa, & Masanjala, 2015; Watson, Wroe, Dunbar, et al., 2019). The districts close to borders experienced an influx of foreigners who accessed the health services as there were no means of identifying the visitors without an identity cards system in place. Hence, it was challenging for health facilities to estimate the number of users of services and have adequate budgets. The porous borders also contributed to illegal entry and access to the no-fee services in the health facilities.

- **No identification:** cases where citizens were not identified especially in remote areas where there were low literacy levels and understanding of some of the laws related to identity registration (Gadabu, Manjomo, Mwakilama, Douglas, et al., 2014; Kapondera & Hart, 2016; Makoza, 2019). During voter registration, the electoral organisation did not have robust systems to verify the citizens and relied on manual systems e.g. letters from Chiefs or Churches. Hence, there were cases of multiple registrations where some voters attempted to register twice (i.e., which was a violation of electoral laws). Each time there was an election, the electoral organisation had to repeat the voter registration process and create a new voters roll.

These contextual conditions gave rise to events as summarised above (e.g. stories on illegal immigrants, child trafficking, health services access and voter registration). The outcomes of the events were the introduction or reforms of legislation and the establishment of institutions and regulations that supported the introduction of a national identity cards system (recall Table 5). The outcomes happened between 2006 and 2015 because of the bureaucratic and administrative processes that involve special interest groups, non-government organisations, government departments, development agencies, private sector associations, legislature and executive (recall Figure 1).

The study was without limitations. We only considered the period before the introduction of the national identity cards systems in this study (e.g. 2006 to 2015). However, the proposed conceptual framework on contextual conditions, events and outcomes of the national identity cards system can inform two lines of further research. First, research is needed to validate the conceptual framework in a similar context of developing countries in Africa. Second, a study to understand the role of outcomes identified in the study (i.e., laws, institutions and regulations) on how they affected the initial implementation of national identity cards in Malawi e.g. during mass registration. We hope that the study fuel further debates on the relevance of national identity cards in African countries.

7. Conclusion

This study confirms that online media forms part of the construction of social reality by highlighting events that shaped the strategies and actions of government. We focused on news that framed the introduction of the national identity cards system in the context of Malawi. The study showed that stories on the national identity cards system covered diverse stakeholders, including government departments, politicians, citizens, government officials, local chiefs, NGOs, private sector organisations and illegal immigrants. The online news stories focused on illegal immigrants' entry into the country, incidents of child trafficking, access to public health services, and the effects of identification during voter registration. We were able to elaborate on the contextual conditions that gave rise to the stories. These were porous borders, limited security, bribery, and culture in rural areas; no-fee services in health facilities, absence of identification, especially in rural and remote centres. Through the stories, the government and development partners considered legislation, establishing institutions, and regulations that were crucial for the introduction of an identity cards system in the country. The study contributes towards literature on national identity cards systems in the context of developing countries.

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