Article

Insecure Identities:

The Approval of a Biometric ID Card in Mexico

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Abstract

Former Mexican President, Felipe Calderón, signed a decree to implement a compulsory ID with biometric traits for all the Mexican population. At first sight it seems like a good policy because Mexico has suffered a lot of problems with identification, but if we analyze the policy we find it to be full of problems and contradictions, particularly because of the corrupt nature of Mexican politics.

Britons may be happy to produce a driving license for the purposes of driving a car, or a credit card in order to buy goods, but they are likely to recoil from having to carry a piece of plastic merely in order to exist within the law.

The Times, May 25, 1995

On March 15, 2011 then Mexican President Felipe Calderón delivered the first biometric ID card (*Cédula de Identidad Personal*- CEDI) to a young girl named Fernanda Ávalos. In his introductory speech at an elementary school in the city of Irapuato, President Calderón promised Fernanda, Geovanni, Juan, María and the almost 26 million children that will soon be registered in the National Population Register (RENAPO) that thanks to this new ID card they will be safer and more secure because no criminal will be able to kidnap them.

Can you imagine what the thoughts were of the children that, instead of attending their everyday lessons, had the obligation to witness the politician and security personnel catwalk in their schoolyard? First, they all had to stand the never-ending speeches of the school director, the governor, the Minister of Interior and finally the President; then they were subjected to futuristic machines that registered all of their fingerprints and the pattern of their iris, as if they were inside a spaceship; and finally they had to smile and pose for the cameras of the mainstream media that started to talk about the immeasurable benefits of the public policy.

The first champion of the CEDI was President Calderón himself. He told to the kids during the event entitled “*Como tú no hay dos*” (There is no one like you) that thanks to the issue of the new ID card the government would be able to tackle most of the bureaucratic inefficiency that affects Mexican institutions. Among other virtues, according to President Calderón, the CEDI will allow its bearer to have efficient access to social security and education services; moreover it will help to allocate more efficiently the benefits of social programs without the risk of giving the resources to the same person twice.¹

¹ See the entire presidential speech in Spanish at <http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/2011/03/palabras-del-presidente-de-los-estados-unidos-mexicanos-licenciado-felipe-calderon-hinojosa-durante-el-evento-cedula-de-identidad-personal-como-tu-no-hay-dos/>

Since President Calderón signed the decree to register the biometric traits of the 112 million Mexicans, the mainstream media have only discussed the advantages of this public policy and no disadvantages have been discussed publicly. Taking into consideration the sloppy Mexican treatment of personal data and the endemic corruption in several institutions, I do not envision the CEDI being the magical card the government promised. Instead of deterring kidnapping and alleviating the bureaucratic inefficiency of social, health and education programs, I think the policy has all the odds to be used for other purposes than the ones planned either by the government or by criminal organizations.

“Identity in a box”

“I am I plus my circumstances”, wrote the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in his book *Meditations on Quixote* (Ortega and Gasset 1984: 12), in order to refer to the never-ending discussion about individual identity. With the CEDI, it seems that the Mexican government—and all the other governments that have invested huge amounts of money in biometric ID cards for their citizens—have changed Ortega’s phrase to “I am I plus my biometric ID card”, as though that piece of plastic has just turned into a kind of Aladdin’s lamp that contains the mystery of identity.

According to Ayse Ceyhan, discussing identity is so difficult because:

Identity is multi-faceted and assessing it in theoretical terms is quite complex for basically three reasons. First, it is difficult to have an all-encompassing definition of this concept, since its focal objects vary from the Self, the same, the Ego to the individual. Second, its analysis needs a second or even a third concept serving as a vis-à-vis to understand and relativize it. This vis-à-vis may be the category of the Other and/or the concept of alterity. Third, identity is not a mere sociological or philosophical concept. It can be treated through several approaches like phenomenology, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, psychology, sociology, structural-genetical approach, anthropology etc. (Ceyhan 2008: 116).

I would like to highlight Ceyhan’s second reason because I think—like Emmanuel Levinas—that identity can only be understood in relationship with the Other (Levinas 1993). We cannot pack this relationship inside an ID card, because the mystery of identity rests in how we relate with our friends, with loneliness, with God, with nature, with our pets, with our beloved ones and with the people we hate.

In his book *Oneself as Another* Paul Ricoeur states the difference of identity as *Idem* and identity as *Ipse*. According to Ricoeur, if we comprehend identity as *Idem* we are underlining its passive features, the ones that give the self its space and time location (Ricoeur 1992). Identity as *Idem* can be equated with sameness and uniqueness, and these features denote permanency and can be given a number or a measure just like biometrics try to attempt (Ceyhan 2008: 116). However if we understand identity as *ipseity* we are emphasizing its active and shifting part, the one that is built in relationship with the Other and that accounts to its ability of initiating new relationships with oneself or with the Other. The principal problem with biometrics is that it only represents identity as *Idem* and fails to understand and show identity as *ipseity*. The principal danger of biometrics is that it only depicts the human being as a big walking password and forgets about the context in which this big password interacts and the relations he or she has with other passwords.

Mexican Administration is interested in identity as *Ipseity* and that’s why they have envisioned biometrics as the best way to entitle Mexicans with an “official and secure” identity by including the info in a high-secured ID card. Francisco Blake, the former Minister of Interior², has also branded the universal “right to

² He was killed in a helicopter crash and Alejandro Poiré was appointed Minister on November 17, 2011.

an identity” to justify the recollection of biometric data. Since children below 18 years are the only ones that do not have an ID, the Mexican Administration have used them as the perfect target group for the policy. President Calderón has turned to the article 8 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child to justify its public expenditure in biometrics. Article 8 of the Convention states that: “Children have the right to an identity – an official record of who they are. Governments should respect children’s right to a name, a nationality and family ties” (UNICEF 1989).

There is indeed a problem with civil registration in Mexico and according to National and International Civil Associations that participated in a conference at the Mexican Congress more than 11% of the children that are born in Mexico do not have a registered name.³ In a nutshell, this means that there are still a lot of Mexicans that live and die without an official record of who they are, so they are invisible to all of the governmental programs. Susana Sottoli, UNICEF Representative for Mexico, stressed these cases were worrying especially in the remote, rural and indigenous areas of Mexico.⁴ Sottoli also approved Calderon’s Project as a way to make up for past mistakes. In an urgent search for support, her opinion was quickly uploaded to the Presidential website as if UNICEF had just granted legitimization to the CEDI.⁵ The Mexican Government affirms that most of these invisible people—mainly children—will be taken into consideration once they have their brand-new biometric ID card.

The most probable thing is that even after being inscribed in RENAPO and having their new ID these children will remain invisible because almost half of Mexican Population lives in poverty. That should be a surprise for some of the readers because Mexico is part of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) but it remains the most poor and unequal country of the group, with a level of inequality that doubles that of Denmark.⁶ According to the UNICEF, almost 8% of the children in Mexico live under the international poverty line, surviving with less than one dollar per day. In a country with the richest man in the world and several more high in the Forbes list, this is inequality. Poverty and inequality are not a new issue, they are the result of failed economic policies, an unfair free trade agreement with the US and Canada, and of the endemic corruption of Mexican Institutions. Even if the ID arrives to the furthest parts of the Oaxaca Mountains, the indigenous people that live there will be still lacking roads to get their children to a clinic when they are sick.

Business or necessity?

The law to create a national population register is not new: it dates back from the beginning of the nineties, when President Carlos Salinas amended the General Population Law contained in article 36 of the Mexican Constitution. Beside this amendment, Carlos Salinas also granted the creation of an autonomous organ, the Federal Electoral Institute (*Instituto Federal Electoral* -IFE), to rule the elections and take jobs out of the—not so partial hands—of the Ministry of Interior. The creation of IFE was not a bighearted concession to democracy; the IFE was created as an exchange for political legitimacy after an extremely contended election with visible traces of fraud. Nevertheless, one of the best public policies carried out in Mexico recently was the construction of a National Electoral Roll and an ID with the data of this roll by the IFE. This credential was then approved by the Senate to serve as a National ID card.

Since 1992 the IFE credential is accepted in public and private institutions. With the IFE card you can board a national flight, you can enter a discotheque, change a check in a bank or contract a mobile phone line. As you can see, Mexicans do not have a pressing need for a biometric ID card, but according to

³ See “Sin identidad miles de niños en México”, *APP*, July 19, 2010 retrieved at <http://www.agenciaaapp.com/home/lea-lo-relevante-en/politica/sin-identidad-miles-de-ninos-en-mexico>

⁴ See “UNICEF respalda proyecto de cédula”, *El Universal*, January 13, 2011.

⁵ See <http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/2011/01/respalda-unicef-proyecto-de-cedula-de-identidad-personal-para-menores/>

⁶ See “Growing Unequal?: Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries” OECD, 2008.

President Calderón, the urge for a new National Register and ID was an incomplete task of the government and he decided to amend that forgotten task. He dodged the Congress and issued a presidential decree to amend once again the General Population Law and implement a biometric identification system. According to Calderón's Administration the main reason to sign the decree was that the General Population Law was not up-to-date and the previous law had been ignored for more than 20 years. At first sight it might seem like a responsible act by Calderón's government to correct its predecessors and enact a law that had been ignored, but if you know Mexican politics—and politics in general—these types of decisions are not always the result of goodwill and good governance, they are usually moved by hidden economic interests.

Since 9-11 the implementation of biometric identification systems has been perceived as an urgent need to foster surveillance and security. According to Nikolas Rose, we are attending a global process of “securitization of identity” where in order to exercise our freedom we should identify ourselves first (Rose, 2000). We can find cases all around the world, from Uganda to Malaysia, where the governments have invited firms to propose and implement biometric identification systems that later have been used as surveillance tools. David Lyon thinks that the implementation of biometric identification systems should not be taken only as a single-state initiative because ID cards are the product of lobbying by firms and enterprises, so we can safely talk about a global oligopolization of the means of identification or a big Card Cartel (Lyon and Bennett 2008: 65). The case of Uganda is interesting because before the Ugandan Congress talked about the new National ID, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced the policy in one of its documents in a clear example of a flagrant interference in Ugandan public policy.⁷ This ID Card Oligopoly—composed of technology firms, lobbies, international organs and state institutions—is selling biometrics as a magical solution to almost every problem: illegal immigration, high rates of crime, better forensics, justice administration or the access to public services (Lyon 2007). In countries like Nigeria ID cards have been promoted to combat fraud, in the UK to tackle illegal immigrants and prevent terrorism, in Malaysia as an efficient way to access e-Government and in Mexico as a mix of all of the above.

The Mexican project was assigned in two stages. Smartmatic International Holding BV won the tender to provide the Mexican government with all the necessary equipment to read and register the fingerprints and the iris pattern. The value of the contract is 299,476,100.00 pesos (around 25 million dollars). The second tender gave Axtel and Unisys the right to build the informatics infrastructure of the RENAPO and the contract is worthy de 664,594,000.00 pesos (around 60 million dollars) (Transparencia Mexicana 2010).

None of the firms that won the tenders have a clean resume. The Philippines Government is suing Smartmatic because of corruption and unethical behavior after its electronic voting systems favored a fraud in the 2010 presidential elections.⁸ Besides that, after the tender organized by the Mexican government, three other firms that participated in the same contest expressed their nonconformity with the contract awarding, arguing that Smartmatic's offer was more expensive and did not fulfill international standards for digital photograph and iris pattern.⁹

Even though no firm contested after the second tender, both of the firms have an obscure history of corruption. According to research by *Proceso* magazine, Axtel is one of the favorite firms of Calderón's administration. In 2009, even though the country was in the middle of an economic crisis, the Mexican

⁷ See “Uganda secret ID leaks”, *The Observer*, April 7, 2010.

⁸ See “Poll automation critics press case”, *Inquirer Politics*, June 6, 2010. Retrieved at <http://politics.inquirer.net/politics/view/20100619-276482/Poll-automation-critics-press-case>

⁹ See “Latin ID, Cosmocolor y Soltic anexan pruebas de la falta de nitidez en imágenes y en la desorganización de archivos de Smartmatic; hubo irregularidades y solicitan que se reponga el concurso”, *La Crónica*, December 3, 2009, Retrieved at http://www.cronica.com.mx/nota.php?id_notas=473206

government granted Axtel several contracts worth 77 million pesos (around 6.5 million dollars) (Villamil 2010). Some political analysts think that President Calderón is using Axtel to compete against the telecommunications giant Telmex and its owner Carlos Slim, the wealthiest man in the world. As a matter of fact, just a couple of months ago Carlos Slim retrieved all the publicity of its stores and enterprises from television and radio stations as result of a conflict of interests between them and the broadcasting monopoly Televisa that supposedly helped Calderón win the 2006 contested presidential election. The fight aroused when the Supreme Court ruled against Slim and Telmex to have a television channel, arguing anti monopoly regulations.¹⁰ President Calderón has favored Axtel and other telecommunications firms to try to hit Slim's hold of mobile and home telecommunications.¹¹

Unisys has also a long history of corruption. In Panama, Unisys was fired in 2003 because the police found more than 30,000 empty ID's in its headquarters that were supposedly going to be used to orchestrate a fraud in the next election and to grant citizenship to illegal immigrants.¹² In the US, Unisys is also under fire for failing to detect a hacking incident that resulted in important security data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) being sent to Chinese servers.¹³ According to *The Washington Post*, in 2002 Unisys won a contract of nearly 1 billion dollars to build, manage and secure the information technology networks of the DHS and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and they failed miserably to detect Chinese attacks to both websites.¹⁴ The FBI even started an investigation for criminal fraud but the fact is Unisys is still getting projects from DHS, the last one as a prime contractor for the infrastructure, operation and management of the Enterprise Acquisition Gateway for Leading Edge Solutions (EAGLE).¹⁵

Identificación a la Mexicana. The possible dangers of the CEDI

Mexican administrations do not have a clear record in assigning and implementing other types of databases. The first big mistake occurred during the presidency of Ernesto Zedillo, when the government decided to create a National Register for Automobiles (RENAVE) to fight against car stealing. They granted the contract to the enterprise of an Argentinean businessman called Ricardo Miguel Cavallo. Everything seemed all right with the project, because there was a big problem with car robbery in large cities with cars that were imported illegally from the US. The problem was that an important Argentinean businessman later proved to be Miguel Ángel Cavallo, a worldwide fugitive that was accused of terrorism, genocide and torture during the Argentinean dictatorship. Obviously when the press discovered that the government was giving all the automobile data to a convicted criminal the program lost all of its legitimacy and the Zedillo Administration had to abandon it.

The National Register for Mobile Phones (RENAUT) was another fiasco, which now came into sight under Calderón's presidency. The policy was enacted to tackle the kidnappings, blackmailing and extortion that were becoming a common practice in cities like Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey. Express kidnappings and telephone extortion were becoming so common that almost everybody has a story about one. My aunt received a call from some people that told her they have kidnapped my cousin and that if she did not deposit the equivalent of 1,000 dollars they would kill him. The phone call was

¹⁰ See "Negar permiso a Telmex tv, acto de represalia contra Slim: Diputados", *La Vanguardia*, May 30, 2011.

¹¹ See "Axtel, la mimada de Calderón", *Proceso*, December 27, 2009.

¹² See "Unisys has much to lose if Uncle Sam looks at the company's corruption here" *The Panama News*, January 12, 2003. Retrieved at http://www.thepanamaneews.com/pn/v_09/issue_01/business_01.html

¹³ See "Investigators: Homeland Security Computers hacked" at http://articles.cnn.com/2007-09-24/us/homelandsecurity.computers_1_dhs-unisys-homeland-security?s=PM:US

¹⁴ See, Nakashima, Ellen and Krebs, Brian. "Contractor Blamed in DHS Data Breaches", *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2007.

¹⁵ See http://www1.unisys.com:8081/public_sector/us_federal/federal_contracts/dhs_eagle/index.htm

animated with screams and noise to create the perfect atmosphere. Luckily my cousin was not kidnapped and was lying with his girlfriend and had his cell phone on when my aunt contacted him to check if he was OK. Several people receive these types of calls on a daily basis and even though most of them are false, we have had famous kidnappers like the *Mochaorejas* (Ear cutter), who used to cut one of the ears of his victims and send it to the family to convince them to pay the price he had put on the victim. So the government tried to register all phones so that whenever a family received a phone call like the one my aunt received, they could identify the caller. It was not a bad idea and it has been done in countries like the US and Spain where the mobile phone company has to ask you for a valid ID whenever you buy a mobile phone. Unfortunately the program was poorly planned and got twisted along the way. The government put an ultimatum on the telephone companies to gather all the required data and threatened the users to cancel their number if they did not give the companies their data. The problem was that the users could easily register their phone number with false information. Since the companies were only interested in economic benefits and there was no credible punishment by the Federal Administration they did not verify the data and according some estimates there may be more than 30 million cell phones with false data.¹⁶ According to Salvador Herrera Chiprés, civil counselor of Mexico City's Office to Grant Access to Public Information (*Instituto de Acceso a la Información Pública del Distrito Federal*) the extortions committed from cell phones grew 45% in Mexico City since the RENAUT was enforced.¹⁷ To make the fiasco more shameful, a journalist discovered that the web-counter installed in RENAUT's webpage was a Javascript application that was scheduled to grow each day according to the computer calendar.¹⁸

Not only these databases have been a disaster, but also the immaculate electoral roll created by the IFE has also suffered from endemic Mexican corruption. In 2006 some IFE employees, colluded with a Mexican informatics enterprise, stole the data from the 1999 roll and sold it to Choice Point, an American firm, generating economic damage of more than 1,600 million pesos (around 133 million dollars). Finally, an investigative report by *El Universal* found out that the IFE databases were being sold at the conflictive neighborhood of Tepito along with other delicate databases like the telephone numbers of the public cabins and the schedule and addresses of local policemen (González 2010).

Bearing in mind the shameful resume in taking care of vital databases, it should be a logical exercise to doubt the governmental capacities to assign, manage, implement and protect databases. In a desperate try to inspire confidence in the new policy, President Calderon has promised to subject all the people that work with RENAPO to the lie detector test (polygraph). Unfortunately, it seems that the Mexican government is not aware that the polygraph has never been an infallible method and less if you face it against a "cannon shot"¹⁹ of 30,000 dollars, the amount of money IFE employees got out of selling the database. It is only a matter of time before someone can find a way to steal or sell the database, so maybe we will be able to find and buy the biometric data of millions of Mexicans in Tepito, the Gorbushka market in Moscow or the Triple Frontier Market between Brazil, Argentine and Paraguay, because like Intelligence Agencies use to say "now crime organizations are global".

Biometrics in the "war on narco"

The Mexican government has been very careful to frame the CEDI policy outside the war on narco and its security strategy. However, is not a secret that the use of biometrics lays in the heart of security and counter terrorist laws such as one of the most polemic laws in the history of the United States, the USA PATRIOT ACT. Section 1008 of this law reads:

¹⁶ See Juárez, Edgar. "Usan 30 millones de celulares para plagio", *El Mexicano*. April 12, 2011.

¹⁷ See "Fracasa RENAUT, extorsiones y secuestros a la alza" at <http://www.noticiasmvs.com/noticias/policiaca/fracasa-renaut-extorsiones-y-secuestros-a-la-alza-655.html>

¹⁸ Hernandez, Julio. "Astillero". *La Jornada*. April 7, 2010

¹⁹ Expression used by revolutionary Pancho Villa that refers to the power of corruption

The Attorney General, in consultation with the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Transportation, shall conduct a study on the feasibility of utilizing a biometric identifier (fingerprint) scanning system, with access to the database of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System, at consular offices abroad and at points of entry into the United States to enhance the ability of State Department and immigration officials to identify aliens who may be wanted in connection with criminal or terrorist investigations in the United States or abroad prior to the issuance of visas or entry into the United States (USA Patriot Act 2001).

Biometrics were first used as a security measure in the Mexican border with the Operation Gatekeeper. According to Peter Andreas:

Technologies and equipment originally developed for military use have been increasingly been adapted for border enforcement purposes. Magnetic footfall detectors and infrared body sensors, many of which first were used in Vietnam, are deployed along the border. An electronic finger printing system (called IDENT), adapted from the Navy's Deployable Mass Population Identification and Tracking System, is used by the Border Patrol to keep record on apprehended border crossers (Andreas 2000: 91).

So even if anyone is linking RENAPO and the CEDI with the Mexican National Security Strategy, I firmly believe it should be read in the same paragraph as Platform Mexico. According to the Minister of Internal Security (*Secretaría de Seguridad Pública-SSP*) this platform is:

An advanced technological concept in telecommunications and information systems that integrates every database related to public security. The end of this platform is to consider every informative element so that all the police and justice departments can carry out their activities in preventing and deterring crime with approved systems and methodologies (Secretaría de Seguridad Pública 2008).

Platform Mexico was built with the clear intentions to mimic Jack Bauer's Counter Terrorism Unit²⁰ and now it is a living Frankenstein that is even more dysfunctional than the DHS in the US because it has committed several mistakes, including accusing innocent citizens and liberating dangerous hit men without a trial. Platform Mexico has also suffered the conflicts and misunderstandings between the different security agencies, police forces and the military. The Department of State cables delivered by Wikileaks to *La Jornada* have shown several quarrels like the one between former National Attorney, Eduardo Medina Mora and the boss of the SSP, Genaro García Luna, which ended with the demotion of Medina Mora, that now is enjoying a placid vacation as the Mexican Ambassador in the UK.²¹ Another example is the struggle between Marine Secretary Francisco Saynez and General Guillermo Galván, National Defense Secretary before the killing of drug kingpin Arturo Beltrán Leyva. According to the documents, the US has been training the Mexican Marines to take the place of the soldiers in top-notch operations.²²

²⁰ In an interview with CBS anchor Katie Couric, Felipe Calderón made a direct reference to the main protagonist of the American television series 24, Jack Bauer: “¿Usted recuerda el programa de televisión 24? Yo quería todos los juguetes, todo eso, todos los instrumentos necesarios para ser superiores a los criminales” (Do you remember the TV program 24? I wanted all the toys and instruments to be more prepared than the criminals)

²¹ See <http://wikileaks.jornada.com.mx/cables/gobierno-felipe-calderon/animosidad-entre-garcia-luna-y-medina-mora-cable-09mexico3092?searchterm=garcia+l>

²² See <http://wikileaks.jornada.com.mx/cables/narcotrafico/existe-descoordinacion-entre-agencias-de-seguridad-cable-10mexico83/?searchterm=galvan>

The issue of a biometric ID card and the creation of a National Register should also be watched under the lens of Sheldon Wolin's concept: "Inverted Totalitarianism" (Wolin 2003) because we are granting precious information to the State and we are not sure they are not going to use that information to discriminate or repress their citizens given the case. Even though the States have the right to know who their citizens are, we should remember the dreadful cases of Nazi Germany and postcolonial Rwanda and remember that both ended in genocide. Obviously that is not the case of Mexico, but we should keep in mind that we will give all our biometric data to an administration that is justifying its right to wage a war against an entelechy known as "narco" that includes, peasants, children, drug addicts and other types of collateral damages. This same administration is trying to legislate the right to establish an exception state without the consent of the legislative branch.²³

Finally, I think we should also connect the CEDI project with the *North American Trusted Traveler Program* designed by the DHS to provide frequent Mexican travelers with a biometric ID to speed up their transit through American borders. Do not celebrate yet, it is not a plan to abolish the tiresome process to get a US visa, instead it is a plan to strengthen the border security between Mexico, the US and Canada through another ID, whose information will engross American security databases. Some American congressmen have tried—without success—to equate the drug related violence in Mexico with terrorism and they have silenced, but with the level of violence *in crescendo* in cities like Monterrey, it is not out of the question that the US will begin to use some techy toys and strategies from the War on Terror in Mexican soil.

Conclusions

The political parties expressed their concern for the presidential project because they were afraid that at least 10% of the electoral roll—especially the younger voters—would prefer having a more modern ID like the CEDI and would not apply for the voter's ID.²⁴ The IFE echoed this fear through its citizen counselors and they vocalized one of the only critiques to the project: the necessity to link both ID cards to prevent confusion and not to affect the voting percentage in the next elections. The IFAI also recommended the Government to hire a firm to develop a *Privacy Impact Assessment* (PIA) just to make sure that all the private data will be safe. In an exercise of opacity, the Ministry of Interior hired a firm to get the PIA of the project but it has not disclosed the results yet, instead it has begun to register "voluntarily" the biometric data of thousands of kids.

In a country where approximately 80,000 deaths have occurred during the last five years²⁵ and with half of its population strangled by the tentacles of poverty²⁶, it may seem logical to trust blindly in a public policy that looks innocuous and harmless at first sight. Nevertheless, I think civil society has the right to doubt, discuss and make proposals to an administration that has an infamous resume in taking care of private data and has been accused of perpetrating human rights violations by international associations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and even by the UN. Making a National Register with the biometric traits of 112 million Mexicans may seem harmless but it can have dreadful consequences. Let us remember what Colin Bennett wrote about the ID's in 1997:

²³ See Taniguchi, Hanaro. "Cambios en la Ley de Seguridad nacional ponen en riesgo derechos humanos". At <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2011/04/26/cambios-a-la-ley-de-seguridad-nacional-ponen-en-riesgo-derechos-humanos>

²⁴ See "Rechazan partidos de oposición la cédula de identidad para menores", *Excelsior*, January 13, 2011,

²⁵ There is no official number of the deaths related to narco violence, but since the last data provided by the government in January 2010 stated that there were almost 45,000 deaths, some estimations made by civilian body counts like "Menos días aquí" or by independent media put the numbers into the 80,000 mark.

²⁶ According to a study by the *Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social* (CONEVAL) more than 46 million Mexicans are living under conditions of moderate poverty. See: http://internet.coneval.gob.mx/Informes/Interactivo/interactivo_nacional.swf

The fact that the manifestation of this instrument is confined to the individual's pocket does not alter the larger set of relationships that still need to be politically determined and that raise a complex range of social, economic, political, legal and technological issues (Bennett 1997: 3).

After reading this article the reader may think I am a National ID Cards Grinch, but that is not true. I firmly believe that if a society agrees to have a National ID it should have one, but only with the necessary data for citizens to get access to healthcare, education and social programs without being categorized. The right to privacy should prevail over the temptation of using data for other purposes and the ID's should have compulsory security locks in order to defend the citizens against fraud and other malicious uses of their identity or private data. I am not being pessimistic, but this will not happen in Mexico in the near future. Firstly, because Mexican society did not ask for a new ID, they know and feel everyday that they have more pressing needs that are being obviated by the government. Finally, as I have stated, the project is not honest and has a lot of flaws. Unfortunately, until Mexico has a real representative democracy—not an opportunistic plutocracy—and we find a way to overcome the rapacious corruption and the impunity in every level of society, this project could be used with malicious purposes and can have counterproductive effects. Let us hope I am wrong.

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