Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast Series

Detail: Episode 56 – Digital Identity sub-series

COLLEEN ELLIOTT [host]

Colleen Elliott [host]

Dr. Joseph Atick [guest]

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello and welcome back to Public Sector Future. I'm your regular host, Olivia Neal, and we're delighted to be back following the summer break, for the Northern hemisphere. Today we're kicking off our new series of episodes with a focus on digital identity and the public sector.

***DR. JOSPEH ATICK****: " It’s fair to say that over the last decade, we’ve been able to help bring into the inclusion fold hundreds of millions of previously invisible people, and to help governments build more transparent practices and accelerate their identity enabled digital transformation platforms.*

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I'm joined by Colleen Elliott, who is our guest host for today's episode. Colleen is a colleague of mine at Microsoft, a former government colleague, and a digital identity expert.

Colleen is joined in conversation today by Dr Joseph Atick.

Dr. Atick is a world-renowned advocate and expert on identity matters. He founded and led several companies in early days of the identity industry, nearly 30 years ago, and developed some of the foundational algorithms underlying secure digital identity today. Since 2010 he's been retired from the industry in order to concentrate on promoting identity for social and economic development, with a focus on privacy, data protection and human rights. In 2014 he co-founded ID4Africa, to be a pan-African Movement to promote responsible digital transformations through digital identity.

He discusses conditions and challenges for successful identity programs, interoperability, and the balance between governance and empowerment.

**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** Thank you for joining us on the Public Sector Future podcast. It’s an honor to have you as a guest.

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** Thank you for having me with you.

**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** Why don’t we start, Dr. Atick, by telling our audience a little bit about you and your role as the Executive Chairman of ID4Africa.

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** My name is Joseph Atick, and I have spent the last 10 years in a field called identity for development. Before that, I was involved in some of the algorithmic and industrial and commercial developments that led to the formation of the identity industry.

My history with the identification domain is the story of the search for applications that make a positive impact on humanity and the world. I started working on identity systems in the early 1990s, with a goal of creating a better human-machine interface that could enable things like self-service and simplify people’s lives.

Today, I serve as the Executive Chairman and the Founder of ID4Africa, responsible for the overall strategic direction and execution of the mission of the movement.

**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** Please tell us about ID4Africa, and how you’re supporting the development of the digital ID ecosystem in Africa.

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** ID4Africa is an ‘identity for all movement,’ which accompanies African nations on their journeys to develop responsible digital identity ecosystems.

The movement was founded in 2014 as a movement that would focus on the African continent, but also that would be governed by African countries, instead of by a big bureaucratic board organization. Those countries would influence the direction of the movement based on their evolving needs.

Today, it’s the premier platform for sharing best practices and experiences in ID for the identity for development around the world, and for peer learning on digital transformation matters among African countries.

Each one of the member countries, and there are 48 of them, designate an ambassador and a deputy ambassador, who become the liaison between the movement and the institutions in their country and identity stakeholders. They keep us informed about their needs, and they spread also the information that’s being generated by their peers, or by the movement, or through other platforms.

In addition, we do have what we would call a LiveCast platform. If you like, this is a visual podcast, which focuses on bringing in the identity community and the brain trust to try to share knowledge and best practices, and it’s heavily followed by the community.

But our biggest asset and platform is our annual general meeting, which is held in different African country each year. So the different countries compete to have the honor to be the host.

And so, this year, we were in Kenya in 2023, and 2024, we will be in South Africa. And the journey continues.

And the event typically brings in, like, for example, in South Africa, we are projecting between 1,800 to 2,000 attendees, of which 800 are senior government officials from around Africa. So it’s really one of the largest events in its scale, but also the quality and the intensity has been incredible. This is definitely a pillar that we make available to the development community to accelerate the country and the continent action towards total digital transformation and digital identity.

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**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** What impact has the movement had on advancing digital ID in Africa to date?

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** The impact is clear and present in many indicators of progress,

I can sort of raise a couple of indicators. For example, coverage of identity systems has advanced across the continent. I could cite Nigeria, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana, and many others grew their coverage significantly and reduced the ranks of the invisibles.

Just to highlight one country, when they joined ID4Africa, Nigeria had 7 million people in their biometric national register. Today, they are at 101 million and counting. The Nigerians acknowledge the impact of the movement on their progress. They say that the best practices and what they’ve learned from being part of the, ID4Africa movement, enabled them to accelerate their progress.

Other areas of progress include increased access to services, because from the beginning, we emphasized that identity had to be useful for it to have an impact. So you needed to link services from the start.

We also pushed for the establishment of data protection, and privacy legislations and governance frameworks. And we can say that as a result of that work, over half of the countries in Africa during the last decade, adopted the appropriate frameworks.

I can also say, we pushed for the proliferation of identity verification platforms for service delivery, whether they are smart cards, mobile devices or identity on the cloud.

We’ve pushed also for the creation of transparency in the cost, so that nobody can take advantage of the countries. And – and that led to competition, reduction in cost of deployment. It also essentially led to the emergence of a viable identity marketplace on the continent.

So all of these would lead me to say that it’s fair to say that over the last decade, we’ve been able to help bring into the inclusion fold hundreds of millions of previously invisible people, and to help governments build more transparent practices and accelerate their identity enabled digital transformation platforms.

Today, these are contributing to their economic and social developments, more services, more payments are passing through these digital platforms, founded on digital identity. To me, this is a compelling evidence of impact.

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**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** You covered several indicators of development to date in digital ID in Africa, increased coverage of ID systems, increased access to services, you know, increased ID platform adoption, transparency in cost, and the creation of an ecosystem and marketplace, and economic and social development.

So what role have the different sectors played in these developments?

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** In the past, the identity business or the identity responsibility was mostly confined to Ministries of Interior or Home Affairs, and was looked at in a very administrative bureaucratic way. And so, you had to register people and you give them documentation. So it felt like the 19th century model of how identity was being attributed and how it was being managed. It wasn’t being managed as an engine of development.

And so, when we came into the field, and we saw the potential of identity as an engine for development, it also became clear that you had to broaden the stakeholder lens. You had to bring in other stakeholders into the game to be able to build and accelerate the growth of identity.

And so, other important sectors immediately started joining. For example, the ICT sector, became recognized as an important sector, led by the ministries and the regulatory bodies of ICT. They became integral part of the foundational ID system and development. And so, they’ve helped quite a bit accelerate the growth of that.

The development agencies, led by the World Bank, and other donors have also stepped up to the plate and started giving the appropriate funding for the appropriate projects because the level of sophistication on the continent went up to the point that the risk of these projects have gone down because the loan requests have been based on very well-founded and sound principles.

But there’s also two other sectors that have really joined, and I think I give them credit for being dynamic in that regard. And one sector is the private sector. And I would, by saying private sector, obviously the private sector that had the commercial interest has always been there. But I’d say there was an evolution and a certain development in the private sector that was major in breaking open this field. And this had to do with the stepping up to develop interoperability frameworks.

In fact, some may remember, in 2018, ID4Africa did a government survey to understand what the biggest obstacles were inhibiting the progress of government in Africa with the identity systems. We found vendor and technology lock-in, or more generally fear of lack of interoperability as the number one concern on their list.

And so, we encouraged the private sector and the industry, and shortly thereafter, the industry responded with open source and with open standards-based solutions as a way to eliminate the lock-in issue and to pave the way to full interoperability.

So this maturing attitude on the part of this sector, let’s call them the vendors, it has helped accelerate the adoption of digital identity, and its role is going to be even more important going forward.

And the last sector that has joined us, I think, is the civil society sector. And the civil society sector in the past was excluded from the discussion. Today, they are at the table, and they’re contributing more constructively. And they are important in keeping the government honest and insisting on transparency.

So if you put together government, the development agencies, the commercial sector, and the civil society, each one has a role in this ecosystem, and each one has contributed to the achievements and the accomplishment and the growth of the ID ecosystem in Africa.

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**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** So you’ve touched on a couple of the challenges already, but have you observed are some of the challenges faced by African nations building and operating digital ID systems?

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** In fact, it is a question that is a function of time. And so, at this stage, where I’m standing here today, I see three primary challenges, three primary challenges that we have to address.

The first challenge is capacity. Africa lacks the capacity for planning, execution and maintenance of these systems. This is a structural problem. It is not a minor problem. It is foundational in the sense that it has to do with the way the economic structure of the continent is working. It’s very difficult to recruit and retain civil servants when you’re paying them significantly less salaries than the private sector. So it needs a different approach.

And Nigeria has done a good job dealing with this issue, and they provide us with a model that we could follow in other countries. For example, they built partnerships with the industry and outsource many aspects of their ID systems and the government IT system and service delivery models to local companies.

Today, as a result, there is a very rich and vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem of startups and medium sized local companies that are servicing the digital transformation needs of Nigeria.

The second challenge, which is something that could be addressed with enough financial investments, I think it has to do with infrastructure. Countries are making progress in ICT infrastructure, but still, access to affordable smart devices and the associated digital skills is limited to about one in three people in Africa. This has to change. If you want digital identity to realize its full potential, you have to make a dramatic shift in that.

So some of the things we’ve seen countries trying to do, for example, Kenya, announced they will be assembling smartphones in the country, with a target to be able to put them on the market at $40 a phone. Some are giving credit to schools to teach digital skills. Some are leveraging students to go and train and assist village chiefs in their use of tablets and digital devices in order to do access to services for the people etcetera.

I think the third one is the lack of awareness on the part of the general population as to what is digital identity and its transformative power. They don’t appreciate yet that. So, here, programs for sensitizing the public, including ID4Africa initiatives, such as identity Day, become very, very important.

So I think if we start to address these issues this coming year, we should see impact in the continent accelerate over the next few years.

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**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** And just picking up on the interoperability challenge that you mentioned earlier, how aligned are the approaches being taken by various countries in Africa, and how far do you think we are away from interoperability between African nations?

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** There’s the bad news, good news here in this regard. I would say, thus far, no attempt has succeeded in getting alignment among the various African countries on digital identity, despite the fact that African Union has a working group on interoperability, in anticipation of a future need, brought about by the African Intercontinental Trade Agreement.

So that may be bad news, but I would say that’s because we’re thinking top down approach on alignment. The fact that it hasn’t succeeded may – is not necessarily a bad news, in my opinion. We may be looking at the wrong approach.

I think if we look at the facts on the field, on the ground, countries are following the same best practices that movements like ID4Africa and organizations like the World Bank, and also big, big partners like Microsoft and MasterCard, and others, who have established their presence on the ground, as well as the traditional identity industry, they have been sharing these types of best practices.

All of that coherence at the end of the day will result in what I call de facto alignment, because everybody’s following a similar path, even if this is not prescribed by a Pan African agreement.

Our experience over the years shows that the bottoms up approach works much better in Africa, because it’s more responsive to what each country needs now, and they do not need to wait to get consensus and agreement and signature and political will at a Pan African level.

Even regional economic schemes, like ECOWAS, and the East African Community and others, have already benefited from this bottom up approach to alignment as they find increased de facto harmonization within their territories. Without them really being successful in imposing it, it’s organically coming up.

I think let the countries continue on their paths, and they will all meet in a place where it is interoperable.

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**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** It sounds like you’re saying, with the open standards driven approach which is being taken today, and the transparency and communication that’s happening across the region, they should be able to reach interoperability.

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** Exactly, exactly. And especially because every year, we continue to – to raise the issue, we’re much more excited about an actionable path than a political path. So we’ll continue to do that, and we’re seeing the fruits of that discussion.

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**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** So you mentioned this year’s AGM, which took place in Kenya, and next year is happening in South Africa. So I just want to quickly touch on that. Can you share some of the key learnings coming out this year with our audience?

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** Yeah, actually, I want to share some key findings that came out of the workshops. Obviously, the plenary sessions, there was a lot of appreciation of the importance of thinking about identity as a digital public infrastructure as a platform for collaboration, so that different people, different organizations could contribute.

And we’ve also emphasized and learned the importance of basically investing in diversity in identity verification platforms within the DPI framework, things like verifiable credentials, things like federation, going away from the model of centralized, monolithic, where the control is run by one organization, to an ecosystem where there are multiple players, which play different roles that are harmonized with each other.

If I may, I’d like to share three or four key issues that came up.

So first, it became clear to us that reform of legal frameworks government – governing digital identity in Africa is a very sensitive and complex topic. Many African countries are still grappling with how to move beyond outdated legacy laws. And in many cases, these laws go back to colonial times over 60, 70 years ago.

So more work needs to be done in this area on a case-by-case basis,

The second point, there was a clear recognition on a growing number of countries that privacy and data protection cannot be an afterthought. They need to be at the forefront of the dialogue.

But there is a twist, and this is the first time I’ve seen this, even from the data protection and commissions, Data Protection Commission’s. The exercise needs to be more as an empowerment exercise, where the objective is to help people leverage their data to extract value instead of the traditional approach that used to dominate the discussion, clamping down on the use of data. So we’re moving from data protection to data governance, and giving consent as a very, very prominent point.

This also leads to a third point, which emerge during the workshops, which is focused on user-centricity to building identity solutions. Governments are realizing that they can no longer dictate what people should have, that they instead should first understand their populations’ needs, user habits and preferences. In a free market environment, this is a logical thing to do. Every company does that. But traditionally, governments in Africa have not operated with such mentality, with such optics, and with the emphasis on customer service and satisfaction. None of them were operating that way.

But this is changing. It was amazing, the words that were coming out of the heads of the identity authorities. It felt like customer service. Many identity authorities are repositioning themselves, customer-centric, giving choices, options offered, and move away from the one size fits all approach of the past.

Now, a fourth element that came out was the importance of giving voice to civil society and treating them as a partner in the development process from the beginning. The concerns of civil society, it became clear, if you leave them unaddressed, could slow down or even stop a project entirely. We have seen this with the Haduma Namba project in Kenya. Now they got it right after they pass the privacy law and established an open door policy for, let’s say talking with civil society and engaging with them. So the same civil society groups that took the government to court just a year or two ago to stop the project are now at the table endorsing the new digital identity approach, which puts people first. To me, this was music to my ears. I loved seeing that transformation. It’s very powerful.

But there was also one thing that the governments have become more and more accepting and have endorsed, which is the important role the private sector can play in a given country to create use cases and platforms for identity verification, for example, including the multinational IT companies, etcetera. They’re much more open than we’ve seen them in the past.

There’s an appreciation that the role of the identity authorities should be limited and focused on creating just the identifier and the right enabling and regulatory environment that allows the private sector to exploit these identifiers, with the consent of the people, in order to deliver services and innovation and – and other things that people want. And this is the – the maturity, maturation, and bodes well for the emergence of a vibrant digital identity ecosystem.

There were many others, but already you could see these are very significant.

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**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** What advice would you give to organizations trying to drive a regional approach similar to ID4Africa?

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** I have become, over the last decade, a great fan of a bottoms up approach, move away from a top down, give the stakeholders in the region that you’re trying to address, the agency. Give them the ability to influence your direction based on their needs. Do not prescribe. Instead, play the role of coordinator. Harmonize and disseminate knowledge and information, and make it flow among the peers. Become truly a platform for peer learning and exchange.

And that’s what ID4Africa has become over the years. And, you know, we’ve engaged, the 48 countries that represent the membership of ID4Africa engage and governance through the ambassadors that they appoint, and those people are very active. And so, if they are given voice, they will tell you what they need. Respond to their needs.

**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** And what does the future hold for ID4Africa?

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** Well, I would say in one phrase, we are staying the course. ID4Africa is committed to ensuring identity for all by 2030, or hopefully sooner. This is the date set by the SDG 16.9. So we’ll continue this journey, and we’ll accelerate our efforts to ensure no country is left behind, and no one remains invisible by that date.

I think we’re making great progress, but the best is yet to come, in my opinion. I think the – we’re seeing it in the intensity of our convening events and the – and the participation of the community. So we’re staying the course.

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**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** International Identity Day is happening this year on September 16. Can you tell us the significance of International ID Day, and why ID4Africa is behind this movement?

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** Thank you, and this is definitely another topic very close to my heart. I mean, the campaign seeks worldwide recognition of 16 September as Identity Day to highlight the importance of one of the most important assets that we have, which is our identity, but also to highlight the importance of protecting that asset and highlight the importance of making sure it’s fully utilized.

The day is used already by many countries, by many governments to create public awareness about the importance of having identity and using it. So this is especially critical at this moment in time when we need to educate the populations about digital identity and how it is important.

Now, since we made the call, we’re thrilled to see nearly 250 international organizations have joined the call, and three African countries officially adopted it as a commemorative day. And dozens and dozens of countries celebrate the day, even though it’s not recognized officially. So it’s a day of bringing the community together to raise its voice in harmony and tell the rest of the world that identity matters. Let us recognize it.

I think the best source to start with is to go to our website, ID4Africa.com. Sign up for our newsletter. And from there, follow our social – social media platforms. We’ve got the YouTube channel, which is very active, Twitter and LinkedIn and Instagram, etcetera. We’ll keep you informed. But it all starts with a visit to the institutional website, ID4Africa.com.

**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** **COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** Great, thank you.

**DR. JOSEPH ATICK:** Thank you very much for having us on your platform. It’s been a pleasure talking to you.

**COLLEEN ELLIOTT:** Thank you for joining us.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you for joining us today on Public Sector Future. And thank you to our guest host Colleen Elliott, and our guest, Dr. Atick.

You can learn more on how Microsoft supports digital identity on our website - that's [www.wwps.microsoft.com](http://www.wwps.microsoft.com)

Don't forget to follow the show wherever you get your podcast, and send us any questions or feedback. We'll be back in two week's time, see you then!

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