



ENHANCED PROTECTION AND SOLUTIONS FOR REFUGEES THROUGH INCLUSION IN ETHIOPIA'S NATIONAL DIGITAL ID PROGRAM

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Contents

Overview	3
What is the context?	3
What is the solution?	5
What are the protection and solutions dividends for refugees and asylum-seekers?	7
What has been the added value of engaging with development actors?	9
What are the lessons learned and key challenges?	9
What is the way forward toward a more sustainable, protection-centred and impactful	
approach?	10
Annex 1: Interoperability between NID system and PRIMES	12

Overview

Refugees in Ethiopia are being integrated into the country's **digital ID system**, through the issuance of a **lifelong unique digital identification number** (known as a "Fayda number") by the **National ID Programme (NIDP)**, a project of the Ethiopian government supported by UNHCR and the World Bank¹, resulting in verifiable refugee ID credentials being issued to those entitled to them by the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS). The initiative leverages **innovative solutions**, such as the PRIMES Interoperability Gateway (PING), developed with support of the PROSPECTS partnership, which enables two-way interoperability and safe, secure and efficient data sharing.

Inclusion in Ethiopia's national foundational identification system lays a path towards significant **protection and solutions dividends**. These include enabling access to **government services** (e.g. health, education, social protection, registration of vital events) and **private services** such as telecommunications, banking and other financial services, as well as supporting the **right to work through work and business permits**. It also facilitates refugees' participation in the digital economy and their contribution to paying taxes in the host country. It therefore builds the foundation for **sustainable responses permitting protection-sensitive inclusion of refugees into national service delivery systems** in the host country and contributes to improving access to socio-economic opportunities.

The issuance of trusted verifiable ID credentials with a lifelong unique digital identifier also has the potential to **strengthen the protection enabling environment**, particularly facilitating the mobility of those refugees possessing such credentials and reducing risks of unlawful detention and ultimately refoulement, while also enhancing the legal recognition of the ID credentials across different government entities. When the foundational identification system is made inter-operable with other functional ID systems, such as for **travel documents** and immigration, it will also have the potential to streamline the issuance of travel documents (including exit permits), increasing opportunities for **complementary pathways** to third countries including labour and education mobility and family reunification.

What is the context?

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia hosts one of the largest refugee populations in Africa, with 1,094,380 refugees and asylum-seekers (July 2025), the vast majority of whom hail from four countries: South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan. Refugees live throughout Ethiopia, with major populations living in camps or settlements in the Gambella, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar, Amhara and other regions, in addition to populations in Addis Abeba.²

In 2019, Ethiopia passed a new refugee law Proclamation No. 1110/2019, which contains provisions relating to access to a wide range of national services, including health, education, access to justice, financial and banking services, identity and travel documents as well as recognising the right to freedom of movement and right to work.³ To operationalise this law, further directives were issued, including Directive No. 01/2019, which defines the conditions in which refugees can move and reside outside of camps after having obtained an out-of-camp permit. In March 2023, the government enacted the Digital ID Proclamation (No.

¹ UNHCR (2024), Ethiopia launches inclusive ID system for refugees, boosts access to national services, https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/press-releases/ethiopia-launches-inclusive-id-system-refugees-boosts-access-national-services. Accessed 03/07/2025

² UNHCR (2025), Data Portal Ethiopia, https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/eth. Accessed 03/09/2025

³ UNHCR (2024), Ethiopia Multi-Year Strategy 2025-2029, page 4 https://www.unhcr.org/media/ethiopia-strategy-2025-2029-pdf. Accessed 03/07/2025

1284/2023) – a law applying to all residents of the country – which establishes the Fayda Digital ID system, Ethiopia's national foundational digital identity platform, enabling all residents of Ethiopia to have access to a unique identifier, including refugees and asylumseekers. Finally, in 2024 Directive No. 1019/2024 was issued by the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS), establishing a framework and easing the criteria for the issuance of work permits, business licences and self-employment permits to refugees and asylumseekers meeting specific conditions, including possessing a Fayda number.

These significant evolutions in the domestic legal and policy framework align closely with Ethiopia's 2023 Global Refugee Forum⁴ pledges, which include commitments on inclusion in national systems (such as the digital foundational identification system), public and private services and expanding economic opportunities for self-reliance.

Despite this progress in the legal and policy framework, less than 10 per cent of refugees currently live outside of camps, most of whom are Eritrean refugees. In practice, relatively few refugees have benefited from the out-of-camp Directive, given the criteria for obtaining permits as well as administrative barriers in the processing of permit applications.⁵



Yemeni refugee Ibtisam at her coffee shop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The mother of two is among the first group of 3,000 refugees living in the capital who recently received a digital national ID which has helped her obtain a business license. Photo: © UNHCR/Sona Dadi

Limitations on freedom of movement and rights to work as well as the process for obtaining work permits have until now restricted refugees' ability to access economic opportunities and self-reliance, thus limiting their enjoyment of socio-economic rights. Moreover, while refugee and asylum-seeker documents are recognised in law – including to facilitate access to services – there have historically been several challenges related to refugees ID credentials.

The suspension of the registration of most new asylum applications from November 2021 due to the national state of emergency and the fact that many refugees possessed expired refugee identity cards⁶, coupled with limited awareness about refugee rights and refugee ID cards amongst some service providers and the inability to swiftly authenticate such ID cards, have led to increased protection risks and created de facto obstacles for refugees to access a range of services, including key financial and administrative services. Moreover, as refugees and asylum-seekers did not possess ID credentials that were quickly and efficiently verifiable, there has been a reluctance to permit greater mobility for these populations. This situation has had an on-going impact on the full realisation of fundamental rights, including health, education and other socio-economic rights.

⁴ UNHCR (2023), GRF 2023 Ethiopia Pledge Summary, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/105341. Accessed 03/07/2025

⁵ UNHCR (2025), *Annual Results Report 2024 Ethiopia*, page 8 https://www.unhcr.org/media/ethiopia-annual-results-report-2024. Accessed 03/07/2025

⁶ Ethiopia Presentation to the Khartoum Process Thematic Meeting, Paris, 23-25 June 2025, page 105.

What is the solution?

In line with Ethiopia's 2023 GRF pledges, the Government of Ethiopia, UNHCR and the World Bank have been working together to operationalise the unique opportunities provided by the recent reforms to the law and policy framework governing refugee protection and the broader inclusive digital ID management system, in order to facilitate refugee inclusion into Ethiopia's national digital ID system and thus improve access to services and socioeconomic opportunities.

Through the Digital ID Proclamation (No. 1284/2023), the Government formally established the National ID Program (NIDP) as the authority responsible for managing the foundational digital identification system, which is open for all lawful residents of Ethiopia, including refugees and asylum-seekers. The system is intended to offer centralised digital authentication services to public institutions and private service providers, based on the use of the Fayda number, a unique digital ID number. An additional law adopted in July 2024, the Personal Data Protection Proclamation (No. 1321/2024) also features strong safeguards for personal data, including the creation of a data protection authority under the Ethiopian Communications Authority⁷ and enshrining the principle whereby individuals should provide informed consent for data collection and use.

In support of the Government's vision, the World Bank approved the *Digital ID for Inclusion* and *Services Project* in December 2023, with the overall object of establishing "an inclusive and secure foundational digital ID system to improve access to and delivery of benefits and services for all people in Ethiopia." The project, running from 2024-2029, aims to support the nationwide implementation of enrolment in the new digital ID system and issuance of ID credentials in which the lifelong unique digital identifier is embedded, the development of secure ICT infrastructure and the establishment of the Personal Data Protection Commission. Moreover, the project seeks to promote the digital modernisation of public and private services that interface with the Fayda system.

Given that refugees and asylum-seekers were already registered by RRS and UNHCR in the existing refugee-specific data system, called PRIMES ecosystem, it was essential to consider how existing personal data, including biometrics, could be safely shared in according with relevant data protection standards, including that of data minimization, in order to avoid excessive data collection by, or data sharing with, the NIDP. This required careful consideration in the form of a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) conducted by UNHCR.

By mapping the data flow and consulting all relevant stakeholders, the assessment provided a framework to assess risks and take appropriate mitigating measures, including through governance, legal, and technical safeguards integrated into the data-sharing agreement. Among the safeguards identified were the enactment of a national legal framework for data protection and the establishment of a national authority for data protection, as well as further information measures to inform refugees about the process and, where necessary to enable them to raise objections to the transfer of their data to NIDP for purposes of issuance of the Fayda number. Through this assessment, the same approach was applied that forms the

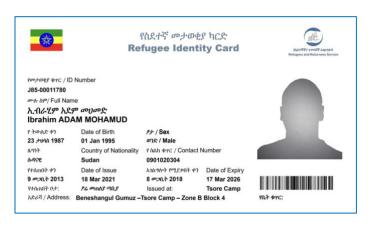
UNHCR / September 2025 5

Oovernment of Ethiopia (2024), Personal Data Proclamation No. 1321/2024, article 5, https://ethiodata.et/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Ethiopian-Digital-Identification-Proclamation-No.-1284_2023-1.pdf. Accessed 14/07/2025

⁸ World Bank Group (2023), *Digital ID for Inclusion and Services Project*, https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P179040. Accessed 03/07/2025
⁹ Development Action Platform (2025), *Over 9,000 Sudanese Refugees Receive Digital IDs in Ethiopia* https://developmentactionrefugees.org/whats-new/policy/over-9000-sudanese-refugees-receive-digital-ids-ethiopia. Accessed 03/07/2025

basis of the DPI Universal Safeguards initiative, ensuring consistency with global data protection principles and other good governance standards.

Subsequent to this assessment, the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS), the NIDP and UNHCR developed and signed a tripartite data sharing agreement in October 2023. Following this, tripartite Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) between RRS, NIDP and UNHCR were agreed and signed in January 2024, paving the way for implementation.¹⁰ The tripartite data sharing agreement between RRS, UNHCR, and NIDP ensures that refugees' data protection rights are upheld, whilst at the same time utilising the personal data efficiently to ensure strengthened access to services and opportunities for selfreliance. 11 The initiative is supported by the PRIMES Interoperability Gateway (PING), which has been developed through the PROSPECTS partnership, funded by the Government of the Netherlands. PING, which enables two-way interoperability and safe, secure and efficient data sharing between the PRIMES ecosystem and national ID systems, plays a crucial role in the credentialling process and directly enhances protection delivery.¹²





An example of a refugee identity card, with the embedded Fayda number. This specimen contains fictitious personal data

In March 2024, Ethiopia launched the Fayda Digital ID initiative for refugees, marking a significant milestone in inclusive digital identity systems. The pilot phase began in Addis Ababa, targeting urban refugees, with plans to scale to cover the one million refugees nationwide. RRS, with UNHCR support, acts as the enrolling and credentialling authority in cooperation with the NIDP, sharing for each individual the biometrics collected (ten fingerprints, two irises and one facial photo) along with biographic data.

The NIDP, once having ascertained the individuals' uniqueness in its database through a deduplication process, issues a Fayda number, along with a 2D machine-readable code. The Fayda number and QR code are then transferred to RRS and UNHCR's PRIMES

¹⁰ UNHCR (2025), Annual Results Report 2024 Ethiopia, page 10 https://www.unhcr.org/media/ethiopia-annual-results-report-2024. Accessed 03/07/2025

¹¹ UNHCR (2024), Inclusion in Ethiopia's ID system opens new doors for refugees, https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/inclusion-ethiopia-s-id-system-opens-new-doors-refugees. Accessed 07/07/2025

¹² UNHCR (2024), *Ping Interoperability Gateway Factsheet*, page 1, https://www.unhcr.org/media/ping-primes-interoperability-gateway-factsheet, Accessed 14/07/2025

ecosystem and embedded into the new refugee ID cards and Proof of Registration¹³ documents. The entire process of bi-directional real-time data-transfer is securely and safely facilitated through UNHCR's PRIMES Interoperability Gateway (PING). The new refugee ID cards with the Fayda number and QR code will have a validity of five years.¹⁴

As of 26 August 2025, a total of 176,663 refugees had been verified and included in the National ID Program. 79,668 refugees have been issued with refugee ID cards and/or Proof of Registration (PoR) documents containing the Fayda number.

What are the protection and solutions dividends for refugees and asylum-seekers?

Ethiopia's approach is pioneering and has great transformative potential for the protection of refugees in the country. The inclusion of the unique digital Fayda identification number puts the refugee ID card on an equal footing with the ID credentials issued to other foreigners who legally reside in Ethiopia. It has the prospect of reducing protection risks such as exploitation or unlawful detention due to enhanced trust in verifiable refugee ID credentials, whilst at the same time supporting access to national social and economic services and opportunities, including health, social protection, education and financial services.



Jamil Bassam, 41, a Syrian refugee who fled the conflict in his country with his wife and three children bakes cookies in his Pastry and Bakery shop in Bishoftu town after the Ethiopian Government allowed the refugees to have access to healthcare, education, and business licenses through the FAYDA ID system. Photo: © UNHCR/Tiksa Negeri

In practical terms, the issuance of verifiable ID credentials with the embedded Favda number to refugees, through the national digital ID system provided a concrete opening for the resumption of registration. verification and credentialling activities by RRS and UNHCR, which had been mostly on hold since November 2021 due to the national state of emergency. The new refugee ID cards are officially recognised nationwide and UNHCR, RRS and the NIDP continue to raise awareness on refugee rights with law enforcement agencies, government bodies, public administration, and private sector providers to support this.

Refugees with the new digital ID credentials are no longer required to obtain a letter of endorsement from RRS for each service they wish to use. Instead, they can now open bank accounts, register SIM cards, receive funds from micro-finance institutions, access job

¹³ A Proof of Registration (PoR) is one of the identification documents provided by RRS as defined in articles 2.11 and 32 of the Refugee Proclamation no. 1110/2019. It is a laminated paper document that "attests as to the identity of the bearer", and, as applicable, their refugee status or the fact they have lodged an asylum application, which is in the process of determination. The PoR also contains the unique Fayda number of all individuals aged 5 years and above.

¹⁴ Development Action Platform (2025), Over 9,000 Sudanese Refugees Receive Digital IDs in Ethiopia https://developmentactionrefugees.org/whats-new/policy/over-9000-sudanese-refugees-receive-digital-ids-ethiopia. Accessed 03/07/2025

opportunities, establish their own businesses and obtain a Tax Identification Number using the new digital IDs.¹⁵

A concrete example of the transformative potential of the inclusion of refugees in the Fayda ID system can be found in the Directive No. 1019/2024 on the right to work for refugees. This directive removes previous restrictions on refugees' access to work permits and business licences, including capital requirements and limited business areas. It also authorises the RRS to issue work permits for refugees who meet certain criteria, including possessing a refugee ID card with a Fayda number. Such ID therefore not only has the potential to facilitate the administrative processes involved, but to also concretely enhance refugees' access to business and employment opportunities.¹⁶

In sum, the issuance of digital ID with the Fayda number opens the prospect of further financial inclusion, access to the labour market through the issuance of work permits and improved enjoyment of socio-economic rights – a key stepping stone to enhanced protection and solutions for refugees in Ethiopia.

In addition, the deduplication process within the NIDP system reduces the risk of double enrolment (i.e. one individual having two IDs or enrolling as a refugee and Ethiopian national), thereby improving the integrity of refugee and asylum-seeker data. This, in turn, has the potential to reinforce public and government confidence in the national asylum system and support the development of asylum procedures that are fair, efficient, adaptable, and grounded in integrity. The deduplication approach is also guided by good governance standards, including the provision of information and individual counselling, in line with the principle that everyone should have a unique legal identity and recognised ID credentials. Moreover, demonstrating the use of effective technical tools to support inclusion in the national ID system also catalyses the broader transition of refugee identification, registration, and credentialling responsibilities from UNHCR to RRS, thus contributing to the long-term sustainability of the national asylum system.

In terms of direct protection benefits, if in the future police are given the ability to verify by themselves the status of refugees as registered individuals legally resident in Ethiopia, this would have the potential to contribute to mitigating risks of arbitrary arrest and expediting the release of detained individuals. Access to verifiable ID credentials could also have the potential to help refugees to register and certify vital civil registration events that occur in Ethiopia, such as births, deaths and marriages.

Finally, the process of preparing and implementing the initiative has also provided opportunities to enhance community engagement, through consultations and information-sharing with refugee communities in order to explain the project and support their understanding, discuss concerns and take their perspectives into account.

In relation to solutions, the inclusion of refugees in the national digital ID system in Ethiopia is also expected to create dividends. For example, supporting self-reliance and socio-economic sustainability empowers refugees' agency to make voluntary and informed decisions related to solutions. In addition, provided inter-operability is created between the national foundational identification system and the passport and travel document systems, trusted digital ID credentials could also facilitate refugees obtaining travel documents and exit permits for third-country solutions such as resettlement and other complementary

¹⁵ Development Action Platform (2025), *Over 9,000 Sudanese Refugees Receive Digital IDs in Ethiopia*, https://developmentactionrefugees.org/whats-new/policy/over-9000-sudanese-refugees-receive-digital-ids-ethiopia. Accessed 03/07/2025

¹⁶ UNHCR (2025), *Annual Results Report 2024 Ethiopia*, page 13. https://www.unhcr.org/media/ethiopia-annual-results-report-2024. Accessed 07/07/2025

pathways, including labour mobility, education, family reunification and private sponsorship.¹⁷

What has been the added value of engaging with development actors?

Engaging with development partners and bringing a development focus to protection and ID credentials issues is bringing significant added value for refugees in Ethiopia. Moreover, in supporting national authorities' efforts to implement their GRF Pledges and progressive legal and policy framework, the World Bank, through the *Digital ID for Inclusion and Services Project* is contributing technical expertise in designing secure and inclusive digital identity systems, while also mobilising financial resources to support infrastructure development, institutional capacity, and service integration.

It also drives innovation in service delivery by enabling digital transformation across sectors like banking, healthcare, and education, with positive outcomes for not only refugees and asylum-seekers, but also the wider Ethiopian population. In addition, leveraging technical solutions, such as the PING project, funded through the Government of the Netherlands' multi-year PROSPECTS partnership, to support system interoperability has also played a key role in driving innovation forward.

This is the first use of PING in East Africa – and amongst the first globally – and is providing concrete and direct support to refugee inclusion within national systems. PROSPECTS funding for registration activities in Ethiopia has also enabled UNHCR and RRS to move inclusion of refugees in the NIDP forward in the field. Finally, discussions about policy priorities in the framework of the PROSPECTS partnership, during the planning phase or in spaces such as regular Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) sessions, enabled humanitarian and development partners to reflect and engage on policy priorities, such as those related the lack of verifiable ID credentials and the effect of this on access to national services and self-reliance opportunities, providing a foundation for more coherent policy dialogue.

In sum, collaboration with development actors provides space for policy dialogue to ensure that refugees and asylum-seekers are meaningfully included in national systems. Such dialogue aimed at bringing about concrete positive policy change is a powerful tool to support a more enabling protection environment.

What are the lessons learned and key challenges?

Key lessons from the Ethiopian experience underscore the importance of national leadership and political will. This has been evident through the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF)

UNHCR / September 2025 9

¹⁷ See also: UNHCR (2024) *Summary Conclusions of the Expert Roundtable on travel documents for persons in need of international protection and stateless persons, 22 October 2024*, paragraphs 40-41 and 48, page 14 and following https://www.refworld.org/reference/confdoc/unhcr/2024/en/150109. Accessed 15/07/2025

[&]quot;...systems are moving towards use of a digital identity and travel documents. With these changes, it is important that the needs of persons in need of international protection and stateless persons are examined in the design, testing and implementation of digital IDs as often they present unique considerations and interoperability challenges that may be overlooked ... It is important to advocate for the development of international standards facilitating interoperability of identity management systems."

¹⁸ UNHCR (2024), *Ethiopia launches inclusive ID system for refugees, boosts access to national services* https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/press-releases/ethiopia-launches-inclusive-id-system-refugees-boosts-access-national-services Accessed 03/09/2027

pledges and the legal and policy reforms undertaken by the government. A particularly transformative element has been the gradual reform of domestic laws and policies to support and promote the inclusion of refugees in national systems, thereby enabling their enrolment in the national digital ID system on par with nationals.

The experience also highlights the importance of strong collaboration among several development actors, national authorities, and UNHCR, building on earlier initiatives such as the inclusion of refugees in the Ethiopian Economic Opportunities Programme. The support of various donors, particularly the Government of the Netherlands with PROSPECTS, through a multi-year, multi-partner approach has been instrumental, especially in supporting the development of the PRIMES Interoperability Gateway (PING) and UNHCR's registration activities in support of RRS in Ethiopia, which have been crucial for the successful implementation of the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in the National Digital ID Program.

Additionally, ongoing policy dialogue between the World Bank, UNHCR, PROSPECTS and other partners and the Ethiopian government continue to play a key role in advancing refugee inclusion and self-reliance while more legal and policy changes are still needed to drive more protection and solutions outcomes.

The major challenges in driving the inclusion of refugees into the national ID system in Ethiopia are linked to several contextual factors. These include:

- Security concerns in certain refugee-hosting areas, which limit the ability to reach specific populations for enrollment;
- Lack of awareness among some refugees regarding the importance of being included in the national ID system and receiving the Fayda ID;
- Inadequate registration staffing within the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS);
 and
- A lack of adequate infrastructure and registration facilities, including IT (such as stable internet connections) and consistent electrical supply, which hinder the scaleup of implementation.

What is the way forward toward a more sustainable, protection-centred and impactful approach?

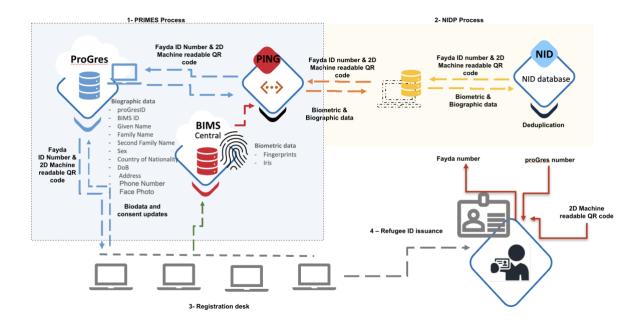
The *Digital ID for Inclusion and Services Project* is on-going until 2029 and aims to cover the entire legally residing population in Ethiopia, including refugees and asylum-seekers over the coming years, in order to provide trusted ID credentials with a unique Fayda number and thus facilitate access to services and socio-economic inclusion for refugees. Several recommendations for strengthening a sustainable and lasting approach for refugees and asylum-seekers can be identified:

• Ensuring that functional identification systems and processes managed by RRS, such as the issuance of movement permits or out-of-camp permits, are fully implemented and streamlined for refugees and asylum-seekers holding verifiable ID credentials with an embedded Fayda number. This is especially important considering the negative impact that restricted freedom of movement and complicated permit application processes have on refugees' ability to achieve self-reliance and contribute to the economy of their host country. Streamlining the implementation of the 2019 Out-of-Camp Directive and the issuance process of relevant permits for refugees with Fayda-embedded ID credentials would be a key step in accelerating their inclusion in national socio-economic systems and enhancing prospects for self-reliance.

- Developing two-way interoperability between the national civil registry system for vital events registration (such as births and deaths), managed by the Vital Events Registration Agency, the digital ID management system and the refugee management system is crucial. This integration will ensure that refugee children, along with nationals, have access to a legal identity from birth to death and enable refugee children registered in the civil registry to promptly receive their Fayda number, when eligible from five years of age. This would enhance efficiency and contribute to a comprehensive foundational identification system that includes refugee populations. Achieving this will require strong political will from the Ethiopian Government and excellent coordination among different stakeholders, along with additional financial and technical support from development actors.
- Supporting two-way interoperability between the digital ID management system
 and other functional ID systems, such as those for immigration, driving licences or
 social protection, would have positive impacts in terms of facilitated access to
 services for all residents of Ethiopia, be they nationals, refugees or other foreign
 residents.
- While noting that RRS remains the authority responsible for issuing ID credentials to refugees, establishing more "one-stop-shop" approaches in urban areas—benefiting both nationals and refugees—through NIDP local centres staffed by both NIDP and RRS personnel, will improve service delivery and generate long-term cost savings. Such a recommendation would require additional financial resources in order to be implemented. A similar one-stop-shop approach could also be envisaged for vital event registration for refugees, which is still undertaken by RRS and that could also be undertaken jointly with the Vital Events Registration Agency, provided some amendments to the legal framework are carried out.
- Establishing protection-sensitive interoperability between the NIDP system and other government-led functional identification systems—such as those for passports, travel documents, and immigration—can ease processes for both nationals and refugees, improve administrative efficiency and enhance overall system sustainability.
- Raising awareness on refugee identity credentials and rights with law enforcement
 agencies, public administration, private sector service providers and refugee
 communities themselves, is essential to leverage the potential of ID credentials
 embedded with a Fayda number to unlock and facilitate access to essential
 services and job opportunities for refugees.
- Developing a **strong evidence base** as the NIDP project progresses will support replication and enable the **use of lessons learned** in other contexts.

Annex 1: Interoperability between NID system and PRIMES

This diagram sets out the interoperability and data-sharing process between the Population Registration and Identity Management Eco-System (PRIMES), the refugee-specific data system used by UNHCR and RRS, and the NIDP data system, described on page 6 of the case study.



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