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Today

Successful Implementation of the Directive Abolishing Extra Vetting for ID Registration in Border Counties of Kenya

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For the last 60 years, Kenya's ID registration vetting procedures in border regions have disproportionately affected certain ethnic communities. The extra vetting requirement, enforced in counties such as Garissa, Mandera, Wajir, Lamu, Tana River, and Turkana, was introduced as a national security measure to prevent non-citizens from obtaining Kenyan identification documents. However, this process led to systemic discrimination, particularly against Somali-Kenyans, Nubians, Arabs, and Asians, who often faced delays, exclusion from essential services, and economic hardships due to the extensive documentation required to prove citizenship (Namati, 2024). These barriers not only disenfranchised affected communities but also exacerbated socio-economic inequalities across the region.

In February 2025, President William Ruto issued a directive abolishing extra vetting for ID registration in these border counties. This move is a step toward inclusivity and equality, ensuring that all Kenyans can access national identification without unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. However, while the directive is widely welcomed, its implementation presents challenges related to national security, logistical constraints, political manipulation, and administrative capacity.

In light of this, the commentary explores the potential benefits of this policy, potential risks associated with its implementation, offering recommendations on how to navigate these complexities and ensure successful implementation of the new directive.

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Potential benefits

1. Strengthening Equality and Inclusivity

Abolishing extra vetting corrects a longstanding discriminatory practice that has marginalized communities in Kenya's border regions. For decades, these populations have faced unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles that have denied them access to national identification, affecting their rights as citizens. With the removal of these barriers, more people can now acquire IDs without facing ethnic profiling or systemic exclusion.

Ending discretionary vetting also aligns with Kenya's constitutional principles of equal treatment under the law. Citizens in border counties will now have the same access to documentation as those in other parts of the country, reinforcing national unity and social cohesion.

2. Improved Access to Essential Services

A national ID is more than just an identity document but a gateway to essential services such as education, healthcare, banking, and employment. Without one, individuals are unable to enroll in schools, register for mobile banking, or access government services. The new directive will allow previously excluded communities to fully participate in social and economic activities, improving their livelihoods and financial inclusion.

The directive is also expected to increase voter registration by ensuring that border communities can exercise their democratic rights. In the past, many eligible voters were unable to register due to lack of identification, effectively disenfranchising them in national elections.

Implementation Challenges

This decree while based on equality and fairness, comes with a range of potential risks and concerns that could undermine its intended impact. These include security concerns, logistical difficulties, and likelihood for political manipulation. For the policy to succeed, it is crucial to address these concerns while ensuring that the goals of inclusivity, fairness, and national unity are not compromised.

1. Security Concerns

One of the primary concerns with removing extra vetting is the potential risk to national security, particularly in border regions near Somalia, which have historically experienced terrorist threats from groups such as Al-Shabaab. The previous extra vetting process was introduced as a security measure to prevent the infiltration of non-citizens and individuals with criminal intent. Eliminating this layer of scrutiny could make it easier for fraudulent applications to go undetected, leading to potential security vulnerabilities (Amnesty Kenya, 2024). Without an alternative security framework, the government risks creating gaps that could be exploited by hostile actors. Given the significance of national IDs in security surveillance and the fight against terrorism and crime, careful consideration must be given to how the government will mitigate these risks. To balance security and inclusivity, the government should implement alternative identity verification measures that do not rely on ethnic profiling but still prevent fraudulent registrations.

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2. Logistical and Administrative challenge

The success of the directive depends on whether border counties have the capacity to handle an increased volume of ID applications. Many of these regions suffer from poor infrastructure, understaffed registration offices, and slow bureaucratic processes. The North Eastern (NE) Kenya for instance, has historically faced challenges in terms of poor infrastructure, including limited access to government services and poor transportation networks. Ensuring that every eligible citizen in these areas can access the ID registration process will require significant investment in infrastructure.

A 2024 report by the Commission on Administrative Justice (CAJ) revealed that Wajir County only has three Civil Registration Services (CRS) offices, leading to long delays in processing applications (CAJ, 2024). Many residents in remote areas lack access to registration centers due to poor road networks and insufficient outreach services. Additionally, the risk of corruption or misuse of the registration system by local officials could undermine the policy's effectiveness. There is therefore need to ensure that the administrative capacities are enhanced to handle increased demand of the IDs for successful implementation of the new policy as well as increase the number of registration centers, deploy mobile ID registration units, and digitize records to streamline the process.

3. Political Manipulation and the Role of the IEBC

Finally, there is a risk that the policy could be politicized. ID issuance has historically been linked to voter registration, and certain political actors may attempt to manipulate the process by influencing who receives documentation. There is a possibility that ID registration could be used to shape voter demographics in favor of particular political interests (The Elephant, 2024). In regions with strong political patronage, the issuance of IDs could become a tool for political gain. Local politicians or government officials may use the distribution of national IDs to secure political loyalty or sway voters, undermining the fairness and integrity of the process. Therefore, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) should work closely with the Civil Registration Department to prevent any political interference in the issuance of IDs. Establishing independent monitoring and regular audits will help ensure transparency and prevent electoral malpractice.

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Conclusion

The Presidents move to eliminate extra vetting process for issuing national IDs in North Eastern Kenya and other border counties is a step in the right direction towards achieving greater inclusivity and equality for all citizens. The directive has removed historical barriers that have long hindered residents in those regions from accessing vital national documents and will therefore promote national cohesion and unity. However, it is important that the directive is implemented in a manner that it will not bring forth unwarranted security risks. It is recommended that the government should act aggressively to ensure that the process is fair and open. It should also make necessary investments required to improve infrastructure and institutional capacity to support the process. Through these measures, the government will ensure that the issuance of ID serves all Kenyans while striving to make the country more secure, united, and equitable.

Recommendations

Given the various concerns with the implementation of the new directive, several steps will have to be taken by the government to ensure that implementation of the new directive is executed effectively and equitably. Among key recommendations include:

1. Enhancing Security and Fraud Prevention

a) Implement biometric registration and AI-driven monitoring to secure the ID issuance process and prevent fraud.

b) Conduct background checks using security databases while avoiding discriminatory profiling.

c) Strengthen collaboration between security agencies and the Civil Registration Department to monitor potential security risks.

2. Investing in Infrastructure and Administrative Capacity

a) Secure funds to expand registration centers, deploy mobile units, and digitize records for efficiency.

b) Establish new registration offices in underserved areas and ensure they are well-equipped.

c) Train local officials to enhance the efficiency and fairness of the registration process.

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3. Strengthening Oversight and Political Neutrality

a) Establish independent monitoring mechanisms through the IEBC and civil registration authorities to prevent political interference.

b) Conduct regular audits and security impact assessments to ensure transparency and address emerging risks.

c) Enforce strict penalties against political manipulation of ID issuance.

4. Public Awareness and Civic Education

a) Launch public awareness campaigns to inform citizens—especially in border counties—about their rights and the registration process.

b) Develop community-based feedback mechanisms to address concerns and ensure continuous improvement in service delivery.

5. Leveraging Technology for a Unified ID System

a) Revive and integrate Huduma Namba to create a centralized, secure, and efficient digital ID system that enhances coordination among government agencies.

b) Utilize biometric authentication (fingerprint, facial recognition) to ensure the authenticity of applicants and reduce fraudulent registrations.

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