The ECOWAS Card: converting a challenge into an opportunity

The launch of an ECOWAS Card to be used as a travel document and residence permit by the citizens of the 15 members of the Economic Community of West African States offers an opportunity for greater integration in the sub-region and greater freedom of movement. But it also represents challenges for the States, which will have to implement it. They would all be well advised to approach the problem globally and to consider creating a civil register at the same time. With an extremely varied portfolio of solutions, years of experience under its belt, and an advantageous financial model for its customers, Zetes would be the perfect partner.

In 2016, the ECOWAS decided to implement a standardised biometric identity card for all the citizens of its member states. This decision heralds an important stage in the integration of the West African sub-region; a process which aims to lower barriers and facilitate cross-border travel. This new common card has two main purposes:
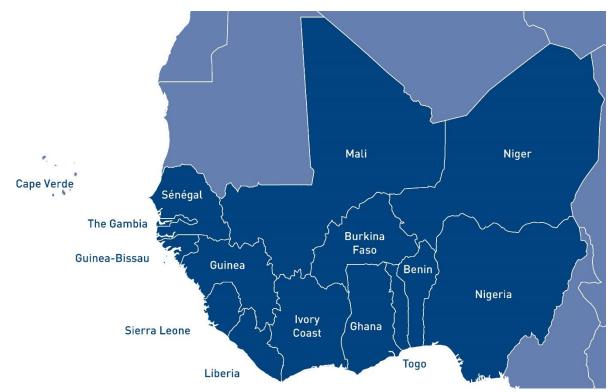
- it serves as a travel document in the region's countries
- it replaces the residence permit for citizens who decide to live in a country other than the one where they hold citizenship.

The technical and technological choices made for the creation of this new card are at the cutting edge in terms of the issuing of highly secure identity documents, guaranteeing a high level of protection against identity fraud and counterfeiting: polycarbonate, hologram, guilloche-patterned background, iridescent features, and UV printing are examples of the security features. For the authorities of the various countries, such choices also

mean that their ECOWAS card project must be entrusted to a highly specialised expert in the field, who is able to rigorously apply the requirements defined by the Community. The use of biometrics, intended to provide greater security against counterfeiting and identity theft, was one of the main obligations.

ZETES' expertise in this type of implementation has been amply demonstrated in projects such as the Belgian and Israeli eID. But the company's added value also lies in its understanding of the challenges faced by the countries in the region, the very wide range of solutions it has, its ability to integrate them, and the attractive financing model it offers.

where you begin to deploy enrolment and card issuing for specific groups before extending them to the population as a whole.

The possibility of integrating e-government functionality

Even though the primary purpose of this card is cross-border in nature, to prevent a situation where citizens must carry a large number of documents, the card must be able to satisfy the needs of governments in terms of interaction between citizens and the administration. Should a contact chip therefore be chosen, when ECOWAS suggests a contactless chip? Is it possible to have both? Or can e-government be achieved with a contactless chip? In that case, how can the different types of function be split within the same card? In fact, all of the scenarios can be envisaged. They simply require a clear definition of the expectations of each State.

ICAO standards and WAPIS compatibility

The use of the ECOWAS card as a travel document also implies a de facto need to comply with ICAO standards. The integration of biometrics addresses this need. In terms of compatibility requirements, it is also necessary for the ECOWAS card to be readable by the WAPIS system (West African Police Inspection System – a sort of African Europol) and by the national police systems. The card therefore has not only civil applications, but also criminal justice applications.

Implementation of the ECOWAS card in the absence of a civil register

The production of reliable identity cards largely depends on the ability to obtain correct data concerning citizens. The problem is that not all countries currently have sufficiently exhaustive information to personalise the type of card required by ECOWAS. Whoever wants to introduce the card must therefore start with a large-scale population enrolment stage. This provides an opportunity to combine the project with the creation of a computerised civil register. Even though this would be an additional stage in the process, it is however an opportunity to create an authentic central reference database that could be used not only to personalise other types of document (passport, driving licence, voter card, social security card, etc.), but also to obtain statistics that would provide valuable information on the structure of civil society.

Faced with a project of this size, with a large and sometimes not easily accessible population, there is a risk of very quickly falling behind. That is why, in most cases, it is advisable to implement the scheme in several phases,

A coherent approach from start to finish

In view of the challenges already described, the ECOWAS card implementation project must therefore be considered in a wider context, and this must therefore be taken into consideration when evaluating the expertise of a prospective partner. The ZETES bid provides a response to these needs, through the company's capacity to manage all the phases of an identification project, including the processes of enrolment, data consolidation, management of civil register-type databases, production and personalisation of highly secure documents, including the setting up of a site equipped with the best surveillance and access control tools, and going right up to delivering the document to the citizen. A unique partner, responsible for each of these stages, provides the benefits of a global approach with smooth, coherent integration of the various components, thus offering optimum management of the overall project. ZETES is also able to handle change management and to manage the integration of the solution with the system operating in the country.

An attractive financial solution for a project that could be expensive

Once the scale of the project is under control, the financial aspect remains to be addressed. The issuing of cards that incorporate cutting-edge technologies generally requires major investment by the authorities and involves a high purchase price for citizens. Build, Operate & Transfer, ZETES' favourite business model, provides a solution to this dual economic constraint. By making all the project implementation investments and being paid per card issued, ZETES bears the financial burden and keeps the price per card down to an acceptable level, comparable to the price currently borne by applicants.

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ZETES is therefore making the necessary investments to install an infrastructure in situ, create local jobs, and transfer its expertise. The personnel will be trained by ZETES and benefit from the company's experience and expertise in order to operate the new plant.

Operations managed by the technical partner

The operational aspect of the model is also important, because it relieves the State of the whole "implementation" side of the project. ZETES takes full responsibility for the management and the technical complexity, and provides regular reports on the project.

Expertise and know-how at the service of the States

The implementation of a card project like the ECOWAS project is therefore a challenge in terms of financing, project management, and setting up appropriate processes and structures, in addition to the technical challenge inherent in the card itself. ZETES offers its expertise and its solutions in all of these fields: BOT, experience with major projects in Africa (DRC elections, Côte d'Ivoire passport, and around 15 more references), implementation of secure production and personalisation sites, integration of complete solutions, etc. Its various e-passport, biometric visa, and residence permit projects also give it familiarity with the production of ICAO-compliant documents.