

When the National Identity Card Act BE 2011 (Second amendment) came into force on 10th July 2011 another task was added to the life of Thai parents or guardians. They now must take their children aged 7 to 14 (approximately 8 million children) to the municipality or district offices to make National ID cards. There have been both positive and negative feedbacks from adults while the children seem to be excited and happy.

Child ID Cards and Unanswered Questions

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The origin of the child ID cards traces back to the Thaksin Government's information Technology project called "Citizen E-Service 2003" proposed by the Committee on the Integration and Reform of the National Registration System and approved by the Cabinet on 14th January 2003. The cabinet laid down an implementation framework that:

Every card issuing government agency must use the 13-digit number assigned to each citizen as Ministry of Interior Identification Number. All future National ID cards will be magnetic cards. Each person may have several cards or these can be combined into one Smart Card. The implementation can be done in stages or among target groups with consideration on technological cost-effectiveness and expense burden.¹



First idea: smart card from birth

Five months later, a Cabinet meeting decided on the Smart Card idea because of costs. It was considered that if each agency issues its own cards, they will be redundant and wasteful on the national budget. In addition, it was considered

inconvenient for people carrying the cards who will each have a national ID card, a Universal Healthcare Card and perhaps also a driving license.

The Cabinet approved the smart card project on 3rd June 2003 laying down the implementation framework that the Ministry of Interior would first issue the National ID cards as the “main card” and update Civil Registration population data. Afterwards, other government agencies such as the Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Labour, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives could link up with the system and input more information onto the National ID cards.

The National ID cards are required to have a durability of more than 6 years to cut costs on re-issuing. The Ministry of Interior amended relevant laws and regulations to require all citizens to have National ID cards from birth while waiting for the Ministry of Science and Technology to supply microchip cards. In the meantime, government agencies could issue other cards as necessary in the same manner as before as temporary cards.

Simple arithmetic's

While the National Identity Card Act (Second amendment) was being considered in the Parliament, the age at which to issue ID cards was a frequent matter of debate. The idea of a Smart Card from Birth went through another revision when the Samak government submitted the draft National Identity Card Act to the Legislative Assembly requiring children to have National ID cards at one year of age instead.

Venus Srisuk, from Bureau of Registration Administration, Department of Provincial Administration at the Ministry of Interior explained that baby faces change constantly and it was

difficult to take their photographs and scan their fingerprints so the age at which National ID cards were required was changed to “one year from birth or within 60 days after obtaining Thai nationality.”²

This rationale was scrutinised again in the Legislative Assembly with counter arguments that the photographs can be taken of the baby with or held by a parent. In the end, however, the conclusion was determined by two factors:

- *First*, the draft law has also increased the required durability of the cards from 6 to 8 years following the requirement on budgetary cost-effectiveness.

- *Second*, the 1983 National Identity Card Act and first amendment in 1999 requires all Thais to change their titles to “Mr.” and “Miss”³ and have National ID cards at 15 years old.

Therefore, in order to conform with the transitional age from childhood to adulthood as well as the required durability of the card from 6 to 8 years (Section 6b of the National Identity Card Act Third amendment in 2011)⁴, the age at which all Thais are required to have National ID cards was changed to 15 years minus 8 years, or at 7 years old (Section 5 of the National Identity Card Act Third amendment in 2011)⁵

Diverse opinions

Pros

Registration officials at the Ministry of Interior's Department of Provincial Administration considered the children ID cards as useful for children's self-identification, prevention of identity theft by non-Thais and facilitation of children's access to public services and other benefits.

Nirun Kalayanamit, the Deputy Director-general of the Ministry of Interior's Department of Provincial Administration said "The advantages of having National ID cards is the ease in self-identification without having to carry house registration or birth certificate, facilitating access to government services and prevention of identity theft by non-Thais. Their parents now no longer need to show other documents. The downside is that children may lose the cards and parents may need to take them to make new ones multiple times."⁶

Meanwhile, children of the required age across the country were excited with their National ID cards. Seven-year-old Ekasit Songsri-in, a Grade 2 student of Bangkok's Phongsuwan-wittaya School⁷, said "I have a student card but I also want National ID cards like adults. When I have it, I will ask my mother to keep it because I don't want to lose it." His mother also saw the advantages of the card. She said "It's convenient when accessing public services. The birth certificate is no longer needed. We can use his national ID card when travelling by plane. In case he gets lost, people can also deliver him home easily with the names and addresses on the card."

Ethnic children in the Northern area were also enthusiastic about the cards. In Bua District's Pa Klang sub-district, the card-issuing authority was busy with many children of Hmong, Mian and Lua ethnicities who came to make their National ID cards. Many were dressed in their ethnic costume for their photographs.⁸

Associate Professor Dr.Pantip Kanchanachitra Saisoonthorn, an expert on personal legal status and Thammasat University law lecturer said that National ID cards assert the human rights of the children showing that they are in Civil Registration systems and make population data more accurate.

Especially now that there is more government welfare, children can more easily self-identify as a Thai national and going to the hospital should become easier. Another advantage of the cards is that it makes identity theft more difficult.⁹

Cons

Child development organisations are largely opposed to the children National ID cards. For example, Montri Sintawichai or "Khru Yoon", Secretary General of the Child Protection Foundation said, "This is an abuse of power without careful considerations of the impacts on certain groups of children such as those with disabilities, orphans or homeless children. The government in theory must also take care of these children. Existing laws are already appropriate to require those at 15 years old to get a National ID cards because they have reached a level of maturity."¹⁰

Similarly, Wallop Tangkananurak, Director of the Children's Foundation, said the cards are unnecessary because "...When small children die, criminals will use their identities for other non-Thai children. Is it worth it? What benefits are there? The old requirement was already good enough. Who will be carrying these new cards, if not the parents? Is the information on the cards accessible online? We already have the online system. The 13-digit ID numbers are already on the birth certificate for accessing hospital services. There doesn't seem to be additional benefits, just a waste of resources. I think it's not worth the expenses."¹¹

Associate Professor Dr.Kovit Phuang-ngam from Thammasat University's Faculty of Social Administration similarly said "It's not necessary for seven-year-olds because in the end it's the parents and guardians who conduct official transactions.

The children cannot do it by themselves or even take care of the cards. I think the existing law is sufficient. I don't know if the government has other motives. The bidding for electronic cards for almost 10 million kids age 7–14 is worth millions of baht.”¹²

Importantly is the worry about identity theft. Governors of border provinces are concerned that foreign children will be able to pose as Thai nationals with the help of the ID cards as has been evidenced in the past when Rohingya refugees presented themselves as foreign-born Thais.¹³

Unanswered questions

In addition, there have been suggestions that child ID cards may also pose risks to privacy as personal information contained in the cards can be easily accessed and abused.

The original idea for the child ID cards was part of the Thaksin's government's initiative to reduce government expenses and allow everyone the ability to self-identify and access public services with one Smart card rather than multiple cards.

The existing gap was between related to ID cards at birth and up until fifteen years old. At a baby's birth, the hospital will issue a birth record

(Tor.Ror.1/1) for the parents to take to the Civil Registration authority for the issuance of birth certificate. The documents used for child identification are the birth certificate and/or House Registration (or in some cases only the birth record.)

However, as all these three documents do not have photographs they are vulnerable to identity theft and difficult for self-identification usage. Often witnesses are required. In addition, many children do not have birth certificates because their parents never reported their births. The proposal for ID cards from birth with pictures of parents holding children is an option to facilitate child identification.

This “ID at age 7” idea not only attracted many criticisms and questions about appropriateness, advantages and disadvantages but by no means did the proposal address the original intention to reduce government expenses and it also failed to address the identification gap from birth to 7 years old.

All that was accomplished was a fleeting excitement among children across the country.

