

Memdeklaro: Self-Declared Identity as an Identity Issuer of Last Resort

Memdeklaro Public Domain Initiative

Modern societies increasingly rely on government-issued identity documents to establish access to employment, housing, healthcare, banking, telecommunications, travel and other services. Government identity systems can provide administrative functions, but exclusion from them can produce severe social consequences. Birth registration failures, documentation barriers, statelessness and political persecution can leave people without a practical means of establishing a recognized legal identity.

This paper introduces Memdeklaro, a free and open source project for creating a self-declared identity document, designed as a social and personal self-attestation: a means for a person to express a self-chosen name and personal ties in their own words, without relying on a government, birth parents or another third party authority.

The paper further explores the proposition that a person can retain a meaningful personal identity and participate socially and economically, even in cases where a state does not grant them a legal identity.

Keywords: legal identity; social identity; identity documentation; self-declared identity; decentralized identity; informal economy; statelessness; human rights.

Working Paper
Version 1.1 — September 2026
CC0 1.0 Universal

This paper presents the rationale, scope, and technical design of Memdeklaro. It is not peer reviewed and does not report an evaluation of real-world adoption or outcomes.

Table of Contents

Background: Identity and Exclusion.....	3
The Human Cost of Identity Exclusion.....	6
Universal Access to Identity as Harm Reduction.....	15
The Power of Inclusion.....	19
Fadi: A Laissez-Passer as a Route Out of Statelessness.....	19
Mr Petrii: Statelessness Determination After Fifteen Years.....	20
Ms McKinnon: Entitled to Citizenship, Unable to Access It.....	20
A Shared Lesson.....	21
Non-Government Identity: Historical Precedents.....	23
The Nansen Passport.....	23
The World Passport.....	23
Digitalcourage Lichtbildausweis.....	24
Bitnation.....	24
The Memdeklaro Concept.....	26
Technical Specification.....	27
Social Use Case.....	30
Self-Declaration as an Identity Issuer of Last Resort.....	30
Freedom from Assigned Identity.....	31
Broader Freedom of Identity.....	31
The Meaning of a Last Resort.....	31
A Document for Everyone.....	32
Self-Declaration as a Form of Self-Publishing.....	33
Common Law Precedent for Usage-Based Naming.....	33
The Photograph as an Anti-Impersonation Mechanism.....	34
Self-Declaration as a Foundation for Reputation.....	34
Discussion.....	36
Conclusion.....	38
References.....	39
Acknowledgments.....	43

Background: Identity and Exclusion

Human beings have always had personal identities and social identities, but the concept of legal identity is comparatively recent.

For much of history, ordinary social interaction could rely upon reputation, personal acquaintance, witnesses, signatures, community membership and other informal mechanisms. Religious institutions and local authorities sometimes maintained records of births, marriages and deaths, but this did not mean that an individual needed a government-issued identity document to participate in ordinary economic and social life. ^[1]

The emergence of modern civil registration and documentary identity transformed this arrangement.

Jane Caplan and John Torpey describe modern identity documentation as a broad historical development encompassing passports, identity cards, fingerprinting and other techniques through which official institutions certify individual identity. ^[2]

In Britain, the National Registration Act of 1915 created a register of men and women aged 15–65. The system was connected to wartime manpower administration and later became part of a wider debate about permanent population registration and identity cards. Rosemary Elliot's historical study shows how wartime demands transformed personal information and identification from relatively limited administrative functions into components of a much larger information state. ^[3]

Craig Robertson's history of passports in the United States describes World War I as a turning point in the implementation of passport control and the transformation of the passport into a significant instrument of border administration. Before World War I, passports were not generally required for Americans crossing US borders; wartime requirements helped establish the passport as a more authoritative documentary technology. ^[4]

Legal identity subsequently became closely connected with civil registration and nationality. UNHCR defines legal identity as recognition of a person's existence before the law, and identifies birth registration and government-recognized documentation as important mechanisms for obtaining it. Government-recognized

identity documents can facilitate access to employment, banking, mobile services, healthcare, education and social protection. ^[5]

However, this infrastructure creates a difficult failure mode: when the state cannot or will not document an individual, other institutions have no alternative mechanism through which to establish the person's identity.

UNHCR and UNICEF have documented legal and practical barriers to birth registration, including situations where a father or another family member has primary authority to register a child. UNHCR has also noted that late birth registration may become difficult or impossible because of conflict, displacement, separation of families and other circumstances.

The problem becomes particularly stark when the missing document is not merely difficult to obtain but structurally dependent upon the cooperation of another person.

Dan Boyce describes the case of a woman born in Colorado to parents who deliberately did not register their children's births, who spent much of her adult life unable to obtain a birth certificate. ^[6] Contemporary reporting describes resulting difficulties obtaining employment, housing, healthcare, marriage recognition and ordinary identity documents. This illustrates a structural problem: an adult may face barriers when trying to reconstruct the facts about their own birth if the evidence was never created during childhood or if the evidence requires cooperation from absent, abusive or uncooperative parents.

Documentation may also be lost through the deliberate destruction of an existing record. Boyce describes the case of a woman, born in Colorado and registered in Wyoming, whose father — whom she characterized as an abusive alcoholic — intentionally burned her birth certificate. ^[6] Her mother's attempt to obtain a replacement birth certificate inadvertently voided the original Wyoming registration, leaving her without a legally recognized record of her birth. This further demonstrates that control over identity documentation can function as an instrument of abuse within a family.

The problem can extend beyond birth registration. A person fleeing an abusive family, cult or coercive structure may possess little documentary evidence independent of the people they are escaping. Legal scholarship has examined the related question of whether adults should have a unilateral legal ability to exit state-created parent-child

relationships; Sean H. Williams argues that legal family relationships imposed at birth can conflict with adult autonomy and identity.^[7]

Political dissent and conscientious objection can also lead to vulnerability. For example, Ukrainian conscientious objectors have been prohibited from leaving the country, or if already living abroad, prohibited from renewing their passports.^[8] Belarusian authorities have refused to renew the passports of dissidents who left the country.^[9] Russian authorities similarly plan to bar dissidents who live abroad from renewing their passports.^[10] Such cases demonstrate that government documentation can be a means of exclusion and an instrument over which an individual has little control.

This form of exclusion is distinct from the previously discussed cases. A person denied legal identity at birth has never possessed a recognized status; a dissident or conscientious objector, by contrast, typically possesses an already-established legal identity that is subsequently withdrawn as an instrument of control. Departure from the country's territory does not release the individual from the state's claim over that identity: a passport functions not merely as permission to leave or enter a place, but as an ongoing assertion of jurisdiction over a person, and its revocation reasserts that jurisdiction over someone who believed they had left it behind. The individual has left the country, but they have not left the country's claim upon their legal existence.

Political dissent or conscientious objection should not be viewed as a form of wrongdoing capable of justifying the withdrawal of legal identity. Depersoning of this kind is a further instance of the problem addressed: an institution empowered to grant or withdraw legal identity being used to determine who may participate in society, regardless of whether the exclusion occurs at birth or is imposed later as a consequence of who a person becomes or what they believe.

These cases illustrate that access to legal identity may depend on permission from an institution which is hostile against the individual: for a dissident or conscientious objector, the hostile institution may be the state; for a survivor of abuse, it may be the birth parents; for a stateless person, it may be the country of birth or country of residence; and for an unregistered person, it may be the civil registration system.

The Human Cost of Identity Exclusion

The consequences of exclusion from legal identity are sometimes treated as an administrative inconvenience. This description understates the nature of the problem.

^[11] In societies in which government-issued identification has become a prerequisite for participation in the formal economy and for access to an increasing range of public and private services, the absence of recognized identity can become a condition of material exclusion. The problem is therefore not simply that an individual lacks a document. The problem is that the document has become a gateway through which other rights, opportunities and forms of socioeconomic participation are made accessible.

In many jurisdictions, government-issued identification functions as a prerequisite for accessing a wide range of daily necessities, including employment, housing, healthcare, education, banking, communications and transportation. ^[12] Where access to identification is itself restricted, this dependency compounds: a barrier to obtaining identification becomes, in practice, a barrier to participating in the economy and in society, extending even to basic needs such as food, shelter and medical care. This illustrates the considerable human cost of exclusion from legal identity.

The first question is one of responsibility: A child does not choose whether their birth is registered. The decision may be made by parents, hospitals, registrars or other institutions. The principle that an individual should not be punished for the wrongdoing of another is deeply familiar in criminal and civil law. Yet barriers to legal identity can produce a functional equivalent of inherited punishment. The child did not commit the parent's omission, but the consequences may nevertheless be imposed upon the child. Rawls's account of the moral arbitrariness of the circumstances into which individuals are born provides a broader philosophical basis for distinguishing personal responsibility from inherited circumstance. ^[13]

If an adult who was never registered at birth has no independent mechanism for establishing a foundational identity, the individual can remain permanently dependent upon the will of a parent or another third party. Betsy Fisher's analysis of delayed birth registration in the United States demonstrates that even people potentially entitled to citizenship can encounter exclusion from documentation when they cannot prove the facts of their birth. ^[14]

This is particularly severe when there is no independent procedure through which the individual can repair the situation. An administrative obstacle is fundamentally different from an administrative dead end. If a person can appeal, provide alternative evidence, obtain a late birth registration, undergo a determination of statelessness, or receive an identity document on the basis of biometric and biographical evidence, the system contains a pathway toward resolution. If none of these mechanisms exists, or if access to them itself depends upon parental cooperation or documents that the person does not possess, neither effort nor persistence can solve the problem.

The practical consequences can be substantial. The individual may have the capacity and desire to contribute to society while lacking the authorization to do so. A person who applies for a job and is rejected because they lack the necessary qualifications has been evaluated and found unsuitable for that particular position. A person who cannot establish a recognized identity may never reach the point of evaluation. Their qualifications, character, reliability and willingness to contribute are not merely discounted, but made invisible behind the barrier of legal identity. The person is not denied a particular outcome, but denied the opportunity to earn it.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of statelessness provides a framework for understanding this. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt described the fundamental deprivation experienced by stateless people as the deprivation of a place in the world in which their actions and opinions could have significance. Later scholarship developed this idea through the concept of a "right to have rights": the idea that meaningful enjoyment of rights depends upon membership in a political community capable of recognizing the individual as a rights-bearing person.^[15] A person may exist socially and biologically while lacking the institutional recognition necessary for their actions to become legally and economically effective.

The social and psychological consequences should not be overlooked. Lack of identification can communicate that a person is not permitted to participate in ordinary life. In this environment, the absence of documentation can itself become stigmatizing. The person may be suspected of dishonesty, criminality or fraud simply because they cannot produce a document that would legitimize their identity.^[16]

This produces an inversion of an important principle of criminal justice — namely, the presumption of innocence. Identification requirements can create the opposite situation: a person may be treated as untrustworthy or dangerous until they can prove who they are, which becomes impossible if no institution has issued them a legal identity.

The consequences are most severe where documentary identity has long functioned as a proxy for trust in determining access to basic necessities, such as housing, employment, and healthcare. In the case of absence of documentation, the individual did not forfeit their access as a consequence of poor conduct, but rather never had access to begin with.

Even relatively minor forms of exclusion can illuminate the mechanics of documentary exclusion. It becomes particularly visible in cases where access is withheld from activities that were previously available without identification. While mild in scale, the 2023 identification requirements for Berlin's public swimming pools provide a concrete illustration of this dynamic. Following incidents of violence and disorder, the Berliner Bäder-Betriebe required visitors aged fourteen and over to present an identity document, with the stated aim of identifying persons subject to house bans and enforcing future bans.^[17]

Consider a fifty-year-old stateless woman who has visited the same pool for years, regularly meeting friends there, without ever receiving a complaint or house ban. After the introduction of the requirement, her history of good conduct provides no basis for continued access: if she cannot produce an accepted identity document, she does not have a chance to demonstrate her individual harmlessness. She is resultingly excluded not because of anything she has done, but solely due to inability to establish a documentary identity. In this sense, the relevant criterion has shifted from personal conduct to identifiability. A taz investigation and a privacy-rights advocacy group specifically identified undocumented people as disadvantaged by the requirement.^[18]

^[19] For someone in this position, the loss can extend beyond a recreational facility to a routine, a social space, and contact with friends — and the mechanism of exclusion may remain socially invisible, with friends noticing only that the person stopped coming, not the documentary barrier behind it.

The case is particularly instructive because the requirement was introduced as a security measure rather than as a legal requirement, and was later challenged on legal and data protection grounds. In May 2026, the Berlin Administrative Court upheld it as proportionate given the documented incidents, while acknowledging that the individual contribution of the identification measure itself could not be separately quantified from the security package as a whole.^[20] This illustrates how identification can function as a proxy for good conduct, shifting the burden of a security measure onto people whose lack of documentation is unrelated to their behavior, which can be seen in wider cases surrounding housing, employment and healthcare.

The example also illustrates how documentary requirements become normalized. Where identification has long been required, its necessity tends to go unquestioned: the absence of a document is treated as the problem, and obtaining one as the obvious solution, while the original justification for requiring it recedes behind a general assumption that identification is simply necessary for safety or trust. A newly introduced requirement disrupts this, since it can be compared directly against the access that existed without it — inviting scrutiny not only of whom it excludes, but of whether government identification was ever necessary to achieve the stated goal. Over time, however, such requirements tend to become ordinary features of participation, at which point the exclusion they produce grows less visible and the requirement itself less likely to be questioned — the same trajectory documentary requirements for housing, employment and healthcare have long since completed.

Documentary exclusion can also push individuals toward the informal economy. When regulated employment, banking and housing require identification, people without documents may be forced into cash-based work, informal accommodation or other arrangements with fewer documentary requirements. At the same time, states are increasingly formalizing markets and restricting undocumented transactions: one cross-country study of 60 markets found the global informal economy equal to 23 percent of collective GDP in 2016, down from over 26 percent in 2009, a decline driven substantially by the expansion of digital, identity-verified payment systems. ^[21] If informal routes are progressively closed while no route into the regulated economy is provided, identification policy can create a dangerous trap: the person is prevented from entering the formal economy but increasingly prevented from surviving outside it.

This trap is often obscured by how survival outside the formal economy is characterized. Reliance on cash work or informal housing is conventionally treated as a temporary stopgap, tolerated only until a formal remedy — late birth registration, statelessness determination, or a comparable procedure — succeeds. This framing presumes that formal access will eventually be granted, and that the interim is therefore genuinely temporary. Where no institution ever grants that access, however, the presumption fails: what remains is not a bridge to formal status but the individual's only available means of survival, indefinitely. The label “temporary” persists independently of whether the underlying wait has any actual end, allowing what functions as permanent exclusion to be indefinitely deferred rather than acknowledged.

The term "bureaucratic violence" is therefore useful as an analytical concept. ^[22] Where identification determines access to the means of survival, refusing to recognize or document a person can have consequences that are both immediate and profound. A person unable to rent accommodation may become homeless and exposed to harm. A person unable to satisfy identification requirements for healthcare may have difficulty obtaining treatment for an injury or illness. In this sense, documentary exclusion can produce severe material harms far beyond the administrative sphere. ^[23]

This raises a normative question: what follows when the state declines to recognize a person who nonetheless exists? Baroch frames the matter starkly, arguing that an institutionally non-existent individual remains no less a living person, capable of suffering, and no less entitled to community membership and economic participation, for having been denied documentation through no fault of their own. ^[11]

The subsequent claim follows directly: the legal world does not invalidate the existence of the physical world. A person's capacity to suffer, to act, and to participate in society does not depend upon a state's willingness to record it, and a legal system's failure to recognize a person does not cause that person to cease to exist. The appropriate response is not to make the physical world conform to the legal record — treating an undocumented person as though they were physically non-existent — but to recognize the absence of a record as a defect in the recordkeeping, not as a defect of the person. Where identification requirements function as a barrier to housing, employment and healthcare, without an accessible alternative for those the formal system will not recognize, the practical effect is to legislate a person out of survival: the mechanism Gren, Abdelhady and Joormann term "bureaucratic violence". ^[22] The function of legal and administrative systems is to document, record and administer the physical world — not to serve as a universal authority over who is permitted to exist within it.

This distinction between legal recognition and human existence raises a broader question about the source of rights themselves. Natural law theory holds that certain rights — foremost among them the right to life — precede positive law rather than originate from it; a state may recognize such a right, or fail to, but does not create it. A substantially similar position recurs, independently, across a wide range of religious beliefs, which have historically located human dignity and the right to life in a source prior to and independent of the state — variously articulated as nature, natural order, or the divine — rather than in the permission of any human institution. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) declares that all human beings are “born free and equal in dignity and rights” and that everyone has the right to “life, liberty and

security of person.”^[24] Natural law theory, a range of religious beliefs, and human rights frameworks, therefore, converge on a shared structural claim: that the right to life is not granted, earned, or subject to permission, but default, universal and intrinsic to the person. On this view, a state's refusal to document a person may determine what that state is willing to recognize, but it does not determine, and was never positioned to determine, whether that person has a right to exist.

At a deeper level, this disagreement reflects two long-standing positions on liberty and authority. One holds that legal and social standing originates with the individual, and that an authority — a state, a family, a nation — may recognize that standing or fail to, but does not create it; dissent, departure and self-determination are accordingly the exercise of a freedom the individual already possesses.^[25] The opposing position holds that legal and social standing is conferred by a governing authority, and that the individual's role is correspondingly one of obligation rather than choice: where an authority declines to confer standing, the resulting absence is treated as deserved rather than remediable, and the individual is understood to hold no independent claim against it.

The tension between these two positions is not merely theoretical; it has repeatedly appeared in struggles over who is entitled to fully participate in society. Throughout the past century, human rights movements challenged many forms of exclusion and inequality: Labor rights established that an employer's authority over a worker did not extend to unlimited hours or unsafe conditions; women's rights expanded legal capacity to work, hold a bank account, and live independently without a father's or husband's consent; the civil rights movement rejected race as a basis for unequal treatment; and children's rights established that parents no longer had the legal right to physically harm their children. Together, they challenged systems of ascribed status in favor of a conception of personhood grounded in individual agency. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream that his children would “one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” captures this principle particularly clearly.^[26]

Identification-based exclusion has received comparatively little attention within this broader history. Unlike sex, race, or age, the absence of identity documentation is usually not outwardly visible. It becomes apparent at the point of a specific transaction — opening a bank account, signing an employment contract, applying for housing — and after an identity is established, it is typically not raised again. This gives the barrier a dual character: from the perspective of someone already inside the system, it can appear as a one-time administrative formality, cleared once and then forgotten;

from the perspective of someone excluded by it, it is a barrier presented at every attempt to participate. This asymmetry helps explain why documentary exclusion is often perceived, even by well-intentioned observers, as a solvable bureaucratic oversight rather than as the lifelong condition it can function as for those who cannot clear it.

The case becomes clearer when the consequences are considered directly from the perspective of people who experience documentary exclusion. Testimony from affected individuals conveys a dimension of this harm that legal and statistical analysis alone cannot. People interviewed for a 2020 UNHCR study of statelessness in the Czech Republic described their situation in terms that echo the analysis above: one stated plainly, "I am visible, but when you have no rights, you're nobody. I just don't exist as a normal person."^[27] Another, attempting for years to resolve their status, said: "I'm trying, but nobody is opening a door. Just to have someone who could say, 'Hey, we'll give you a chance and you solve your situation.' I just want that chance." A third, after repeated failed efforts, said simply: "At least a hundred times over I have thought about how it could be solved. But there is no way out."

A refusal by one country to issue identification can lead to wider exclusion from all countries' visa systems: "They should give me a document and if they don't want me here in the Czech Republic, I can go to another country and start working there." One interviewee, born in a Soviet labor camp and later stripped of recognition by both the Ukrainian and Russian authorities was left unable to obtain a passport from either state. This illustrates that a person's effort to regularize their situation can reach a genuine limit: an individual may pursue every available avenue and still find that no state is willing to cooperate, at which point neither persistence nor compliance can produce a different outcome.

The study confirmed the widespread exclusion caused by lack of documentation: "You should ask me what obstacles it doesn't present. I'd say it affects everything." The informal economy — cash-based work and informal housing — acted as the structure of survival for individuals caught in this cycle. One interviewee put it this way: "Every time they release me from detention and I am back on the street, I sleep on the street, I collect food from the trash. Then I manage to talk to somebody and find some work, I go to work and earn some money so I can find housing through some acquaintances. [...] And so I stay there for a while, I work somewhere, it settles and then they check me again and arrest and detain me again. I lose my housing, work, everything. [...] It is over and over like this. After each time I am released I have to start from zero."

In this situation, it is acquaintances — friends providing informal work leads and shared housing — who make survival possible at all, not any institution. Interviewees repeatedly credited friends and acquaintances, rather than the state, for whatever stability they achieved. However, the study reports that social stigma and internalized blame can isolate individuals from precisely the informal social relationships identified above as their most reliable source of practical support. Interviewed persons frequently avoided disclosing their situation to friends or family specifically because of the stigma attached to it.

The consequences of exclusion from healthcare can cause direct harm. In the Czech study, one interviewed stateless person sought urgent dental treatment but was unable to produce any identity document. He subsequently attempted to treat the condition himself by extracting the tooth with a wrench, which resulted in a shattered tooth and a severe inflammation. A comparable danger appears in Ms McKinnon's case: unable to obtain health insurance without identification, she was forced to give birth at home rather than under medical supervision, a situation that can carry risk to both mother and child in the event of complications.

A similar account describes the situation of Mr Lo, who lived in Australia for 45 years without legal status after arriving as a stowaway in 1981. He worked continuously as a chef, paid income tax throughout, and never depended on public assistance, yet described his situation as follows: "I felt like a hated outcast. I couldn't possibly tell anyone who I am all these years." ^[28] In his eighties, unable to work and living on limited savings, he said: "I rely on a loaf of bread for every two days", and described the cumulative psychological toll of decades in limbo as feeling like "a caged bird". Despite his situation, he said that living in Australia was a blessing: "Even under such unfortunate circumstances today, I can do whatever I want here." His case was ultimately resolved through ministerial intervention in 2026, granting him permanent residency after more than four decades — an outcome he described as the first time he had "felt happy" in over forty years, and one he summarized in a single request: "I just want an identity and ask nothing more."

A comparable sense of belonging, developed independently of legal status, appears in the Czech study. One participant stated: "I am telling you, I know Prague better than the place I was born. I feel good here in any situation." Mr Lo expressed the same sentiment about Australia decades into his own unresolved status. In both cases, social membership and a genuine sense of belonging formed and persisted entirely apart from the state's willingness to formally recognize the person holding them — the

precise distinction between social identity and legal identity on which this paper's argument depends.

This raises a difficult question for international protection law. Refusal to issue identification does not automatically constitute persecution under the Refugee Convention, and statelessness alone does not establish refugee status. Nevertheless, UNHCR has recognized that arbitrary deprivation of nationality and identity documentation can constitute persecution in certain cases.^[29]

Universal Access to Identity as Harm Reduction

An effective harm reduction measure would be to separate the establishment of identity from the determination of nationality, parentage and legal status. A state could issue a certificate of identity to an otherwise undocumented person using available biographical information, a biometric photograph and fingerprints, while checking relevant databases for previous registration under another identity. Where identity could not be conclusively verified, the document could state "identity not verified". Such a certificate would not establish parentage, citizenship or immigration status. It would instead establish a foundational legal identity from which the individual could pursue later determinations of nationality, statelessness, residence or immigration status. UNHCR practice already demonstrates that identity documentation can be provided to people whose nationality or legal status remains unresolved.^[30]

Another possible solution would be for a recognized international organization, such as the United Nations or the International Committee of the Red Cross, to issue substitute identity documents for individuals who lack any form of official identification. Such documentation could be based on the applicant's own testimony, supported by biometric information such as a photograph and fingerprints, meaning that the consent of birth parents or the authorities of the country of birth would not be required. An old passport, birth certificate, or other state-issued document would likewise not be a prerequisite. Such a document would not grant legal residency, establish citizenship, determine stateless status, or confirm parentage, and therefore would not bypass or undermine national sovereignty. Its purpose would be limited to providing recognized proof of identity that an individual could present when applying for legal status through existing national procedures; governments would retain full authority to approve or deny any visa application. However, if individual nation-states began to recognize NGO-issued identity documents as acceptable evidence for visa applications, this could create a pathway toward legal status for people who were previously excluded solely because they lacked a birth certificate, passport, or other proof of identity.

The International Committee of the Red Cross's emergency travel document provides a practical example.^[31] The ICRC's documentation states that the emergency travel document is prepared on the basis of the applicant's own statements, with other evidence, such as a driver's license or a UNHCR-assigned number, accepted where available but not required. The document is issued only "as a last resort, when

authorities are not in a position to provide a document" — precisely the population this paper addresses — and the ICRC is explicit that it is not a means to establish or alter the status or nationality of its holder, distinguishing it from travel documents issued by states party to the relevant statelessness and refugee conventions.

Authentication of the document is achieved by biometrics. The ICRC states that the photograph, signature and fingerprints enable visa authorities to verify that the applicant and the bearer are one and the same. This is the same structure described in §8: a biometric link between a person and a document, established independently of any claim about the institutional recognition of the personal data the document contains. The ICRC's model demonstrates that this structure is not a theoretical possibility but an operating institutional practice, in continuous use since 1945 and applied to roughly 600,000 people to date, that combines self-declared identity with biometric verification to produce a document accepted, on a case-by-case basis, by border authorities worldwide.

However, there exists a circular dependency: the ICRC emergency travel document is issued only in cases where the applicant already holds the necessary visa and satisfies the destination country's travel requirements. As a visa application generally requires the applicant to already possess a passport, the applicant may be unable to obtain the acceptance condition needed to receive the emergency travel document. Reversing this sequence — issuing the travel document first, so that it can subsequently be used to support a visa application — would break the circularity.

Similarly, the procedures designed to resolve statelessness may themselves be structurally inaccessible to the people they exist to serve. Many countries' statelessness determination procedures require the applicant to hold lawful residence before an application may be submitted, while lawful residence in turn requires a passport or other recognized travel document — leaving a person unable to initiate the procedure designed to resolve their situation.

A comparable mechanism exists in German law. Under § 4(6) of the Residence Ordinance, a substitute travel document may be issued bearing a notation that the personal data it contains is based solely on the applicant's own statements.^[32] German courts have confirmed that such a document retains a genuine identification function despite this notation, while losing the legal presumption of accuracy that a verified document would carry — the document identifies the person without certifying the underlying facts about them.^[33] Obtaining such a document, however, requires the applicant to already hold a valid residence permit — reproducing the same circular

dependency described above: a document premised on self-testimony remains conditioned on legal status the applicant may not have any way to establish.

A small number of states maintain comparatively strong statelessness determination procedures. These protections, however, are available only to a person already present on the state's territory, and lawful entry to that territory itself typically requires a passport. Similarly, a person inside a country offering no protection generally has no route to apply for statelessness determination at a supportive country's embassy. The same circular dependency — no passport without legal residence, no residence without a passport — equally forecloses the international remedies designed for precisely this situation.

A comparable pattern appears in policies specifically designed to assist people without legal immigration status. California's Assembly Bill 60 (2013) requires the Department of Motor Vehicles to issue a driver's license to an applicant unable to prove lawful presence in the United States — but the applicant must still submit proof of identity, typically a foreign passport, a consular identification card, or a foreign birth certificate.^[34] Mexico's temporary regularization programs for foreign nationals residing irregularly in the country follow the same structure: an applicant must submit a passport, another official travel or identity document issued by the authorities of their country of origin, or comparable consular proof of identity and nationality.^[35] Both measures reflect a genuine policy judgment that the absence of legal immigration status should not, by itself, bar a person from meaningful participation in society. Both nonetheless retain an unconditional requirement for pre-existing government-issued identification. The result is not the removal of the barrier this paper describes, but its relocation: the requirement shifts from a valid visa or residence permit to a valid passport or birth certificate, continuing to exclude precisely the population this paper addresses — those whose country of origin will not, or cannot, issue them any document at all.

A similar pattern holds even where the barrier is assumed to be financial rather than documentary. Citizenship-by-investment programs, which grant nationality in exchange for a substantial financial contribution, nonetheless require applicants to submit an existing passport or birth certificate as part of the application.^[36] This is not to suggest that a six-figure financial threshold would be a reasonable or humane precondition for legal personhood if it did exist — plainly, it would not, and such a requirement would be unethical. The relevant point is narrower and, in a sense, more troubling: no such threshold exists at all. Financial means, however substantial, cannot substitute for the missing document under any circumstances. A person entirely

excluded from documentary identity therefore has no path to legal recognition even in principle — not a difficult path, not an expensive one, but none whatsoever. If legal personhood is not conferred at birth, the demonstrated examples suggest it cannot be granted as an adult either, through effort, amnesty, wealth, or any other means, regardless of what the person has to offer.

The same mechanism extends even to jurisdictions explicitly designed as alternatives to existing nation-state structures. Micronations and free-city projects such as Liberland and Próspera, despite their expressed meritocratic orientation, both require applicants for citizenship or residency to submit existing government-issued identification.^{[37] [38]} Such requirements are typically attributed to safety or fraud prevention, but they reproduce, within projects explicitly conceived as alternatives to conventional state structures, the same unconditional documentary requirement those structures impose — leaving a person with no government-issued identification unable to demonstrate anything about themselves at all, and treated as inherently suspect by default, rather than as an individual capable of being assessed on their own account.

A just system would therefore provide an accessible pathway by which an adult can independently establish a foundational identity without the cooperation of their birth parents or birth country. Without such a pathway, a missing document can become a permanent barrier to employment, housing, healthcare and social participation. What appears to be a "papers problem" can consequently become poverty, homelessness, untreated illness and social isolation — and, in extreme circumstances, a direct threat to life.

The Power of Inclusion

Section 2 documented the human cost of exclusion from legal identity. The converse is equally instructive: what happens when that barrier is removed. The following accounts — one resolved through a laissez-passer travel document, one through a formal statelessness determination, one through a delayed registration of birth — illustrate that the underlying deficiency in each case was administrative rather than personal, and that its removal produced immediate and substantial change.

Fadi: A Laissez-Passer as a Route Out of Statelessness

Fadi was born in Lebanon to a Lebanese mother and a Syrian father whose marriage was never registered and who subsequently disappeared. Under Lebanese nationality law, which does not permit mothers to pass citizenship to their children, Fadi was left stateless.^[39] He was not legally permitted to attend school, though his mother arranged informal access, and he went on to earn a scholarship to the Lebanese University, completing a Bachelor's degree in Finance and a Master's degree in Financial Engineering — his diploma issued to "Fadi X", the university having no legal identity on record. Unable to work legally, he was employed off the books as a business analyst for six years by an employer willing to accept the risk. He was repeatedly arrested and detained for lack of identification, barred from opening a bank account and obtaining a driver's license, and when his mother passed away in 2016, was unable to inherit her estate, including their home.

In 2017, Fadi was accepted into the Talent Catalogue maintained by Talent Beyond Boundaries, an organization connecting displaced and stateless skilled workers with employers abroad. He was offered a position in Sydney, Australia. Talent Beyond Boundaries then assisted him in obtaining a laissez-passer — a one-way travel document, distinct from a passport — from the Lebanese authorities: the first piece of official identification he had ever possessed. On the strength of that document, Fadi was able to successfully apply for a skilled worker visa and relocated to Australia in 2019.

Fadi's case demonstrates that full citizenship is not always the precondition for a life-altering change in circumstances. A single, limited-purpose travel document — issued not by a court, a civil registry, or a determination procedure, but as an administrative

accommodation — was sufficient to open a pathway that decades without documentation had foreclosed.

Mr Petrii: Statelessness Determination After Fifteen Years

Mr Petrii was born in a Soviet labor camp in Siberia; because the birth occurred in a gulag, no record of it exists. ^[11] He later lived with his family in present-day Ukraine before arriving in the Czech Republic more than fifteen years ago. Once his Soviet passport expired, no post-Soviet successor state recognized him as a citizen, leaving him without a valid document or any means of obtaining one. For over a decade he lived without identification and without legal access to employment, housing, or medical care, repeatedly detained and subject to expulsion proceedings whenever identified by police, his circumstances alternating between detention and homelessness.

In 2017, the Organization for Aid to Refugees identified Mr Petrii as a stateless person and submitted, on his behalf, one of the first statelessness determination applications made under the Czech implementation of the 1954 Convention. No dedicated procedure existed in Czech law for processing such applications, and the Ministry of the Interior initially declined to act on it at all. Mr Petrii waited more than two years for a decision — a period his lawyer, Petr Baroch of OPU, later described as marked by deteriorating health. It was not legal proceedings alone, but sustained advocacy — complaints, open letters, media attention, and eventually favorable rulings from the Supreme Administrative Court — that ultimately moved the Ministry to act.

Mr Petrii's application was approved, and he was officially recognized as a stateless person. For the first time in more than fifteen years, he obtained legal residence in the country where he had been living, and no longer faced the risk of arbitrary detention.

Ms McKinnon: Entitled to Citizenship, Unable to Access It

Ms McKinnon was born in Colorado, USA. Her parents, believing that government identification and Social Security numbers marked what they described as "the mark of the beast", never registered her birth. ^[6] Because the United States confers citizenship on all persons born on its territory, McKinnon was a US citizen from birth as a matter of law, but because no record of that birth existed, she had no means of proving it.

The consequences accumulated across her adult life. She could not obtain a driver's license, could not enroll in online education, could not obtain health insurance, could not legally marry her husband, and could not obtain formal employment. Her attorney later argued in court filings that McKinnon's situation left her with less recourse than an undocumented immigrant, who may at least have an eventual path to lawful status. McKinnon, by contrast, had no path at all under Colorado's existing rules for delayed registration of birth, which required at least one official document dated to her first decade of life — a decade during which, owing to her parents' decisions, no such document was ever created.

Following litigation brought on her behalf, Colorado revised this rule, replacing the first-decade-of-life requirement with a requirement of any document created at least ten years prior to the application date — a threshold her attorneys stated she could meet. The revised rule took effect in March 2026, after which McKinnon was expected to be able to obtain a delayed birth certificate for the first time, more than three decades after her birth.

McKinnon's case differs from the two preceding it in a significant respect: unlike Fadi or Mr Petrii, she held a valid claim to citizenship from the moment of her birth. Entitlement to citizenship, however, proved insufficient on its own; without a documentary record establishing the underlying facts of her birth, that entitlement could not be exercised. Her case demonstrates that the administrative dead end described in §2 can arise entirely from a failure to create a record at the point of birth, irrespective of the individual's actual legal status.

A Shared Lesson

All three cases follow the same underlying pattern. Fadi worked for six years as a business analyst despite legal barriers; Mr Petrii spent over a decade seeking a legal foothold while cycling between detention and homelessness; McKinnon was denied a driver's license, health insurance and formal employment for over a decade. In none of these cases was fuller participation in society prevented by any defect of character or lack of effort — all three were evidently capable and, within the narrow means available to them, attempting to build ordinary lives.

What prevented that participation was, in each case, an administrative barrier over which the individual had no control and which could not be resolved through effort

alone. And in each case, removing the barrier — a limited travel document, a determination of statelessness, a delayed birth certificate — was sufficient to permit the kind of ordinary social and economic participation that documentary exclusion had foreclosed for decades.

Fadi's laissez-passer enabled him to leave the country of his birth for a new life abroad, an outcome he welcomed. Mr Lo, by contrast, had built forty-five years of social and professional ties to Australia and did not wish to leave; for him, the resolution that mattered was not an opportunity to depart, but permission to remain in the place he considered home. In Ms McKinnon's case, the delayed registration of birth granted her the ability to finally exercise the rights of citizenship she had held since birth, in the only country she had ever called home.

The accounts converge on the same conclusion: documentary exclusion inflicts real harm that is not the fault of the individual, and that harm is, in principle, reversible once some institution becomes willing to act.

Non-Government Identity: Historical Precedents

The idea of identity documents existing outside the exclusive control of a nation-state has several precedents.

The Nansen Passport

The Nansen passport, created by Norwegian explorer and League of Nations High Commissioner Fridtjof Nansen in 1922, provided internationally recognized documentation for refugees who could not obtain national passports.^[40] By the time issuance ended, approximately 450,000 people had held a Nansen passport, and the document was ultimately recognized by 52 countries — evidence that a non-government identity document can achieve genuine, large-scale international acceptance under the right institutional backing.

The Nansen passport was, however, not a permanent solution; it was discontinued in 1942 and effectively replaced by the UN Conventions on statelessness and refugee status, which returned the responsibility for issuing identity documents to individual nation-states — the same arrangement whose gaps the Nansen passport had been created to fill. The underlying problem it had solved did not disappear with it. In this sense, the Nansen passport functioned as an identity issuer of last resort in the fullest sense of the term: available specifically to those no state would recognize, and, once retired, replaced by no comparable mechanism.

The World Passport

In 1954, the World Service Authority, founded by peace activist Garry Davis, began issuing the World Passport, a humanitarian initiative associated with Davis's philosophy of world citizenship and peace.^[41] The organization describes the World Passport as having received visas or entry stamps from over 150 countries on a case-by-case basis. According to the World Service Authority, over one million people have been issued a World Passport. Throughout the years, the World Passport has been issued free of charge to stateless people and refugees.

The World Passport's application process is notable for a design choice that directly addresses the circular dependency described in §3: while applicants are asked to

submit a copy of an existing government-issued document where one is available, the World Service Authority states that applicants without any such document may instead submit fingerprints, allowing a foundational proof of identity to be established.

It has since been more commonly treated as a "fantasy passport" by authorities including the European Union, and lacks the kind of broad multilateral recognition the Nansen passport achieved — but it remains in active use, and its willingness to accept applicants without any prior documentation distinguishes it from most of the humanitarian remedies discussed in §3.

Digitalcourage Lichtbildausweis

More recently, Digitalcourage, a German digital-rights organization active since 1987, developed the Lichtbildausweis, a non-government photo ID whose holder may choose the information printed on the card.^[42] It was launched in direct response to a wave of services that had begun demanding identification for transactions they had previously conducted without it. The card explicitly permits a self-chosen name and is available to stateless applicants, demonstrating that identity data can be self-asserted rather than state-verified.

Digitalcourage draws an intentional distinction between contexts where a government-issued document is legally required, such as crossing a border or opening a bank account, and contexts where a form of photo identification is requested only as a matter of a private company's own policy, which may include services such as a gym membership, mail services, or a hotel room, and positions its card as a substitute specifically for the latter category. The organization reports anecdotal use of the card succeeding in ordinary daily transactions.

Bitnation

Bitnation, founded by Susanne Tarkowski Tempelhof in 2014, represented another technological approach, experimenting with blockchain-based passports and identity documents in the late 2010s.^[43] Its ethos was built on the premise that a person's beliefs, actions and chosen community should carry more weight than their circumstances of birth. Bitnation launched its Refugee Emergency Response initiative in 2015 to issue a blockchain-recorded Blockchain Emergency ID to undocumented refugees and was later recognized with a Netexplo Grand Prix award, co-organized by

UNESCO, in 2017. Its Diplomatic Passport was explicitly conceived as an experiment in non-territorial diplomacy and blockchain-based identity. The Bitnation project ceased operations in the early 2020s.

The Memdeklaro Concept

Memdeklaro — Esperanto for "self-declaration" — is a self-asserted declaration of identity, explicitly conceived as a non-government identification instrument that does not rely upon any third-party authority. ^[44]

The declaration permits an individual to record a self-chosen name, date of birth, photograph, signature and an optional personal note, for example, expressing a belief such as conscientious objection.

The declaration deliberately does not attest to or include place of birth, citizenship, stateless status, residence, parentage or name assigned at birth, and does not constitute membership in any government database.

This omission reflects both an epistemic and a practical rationale. Where the relevant question is "what name does this individual choose to use", the individual is the primary, and in a meaningful sense the only competent, source of that information; the answer does not depend upon a birth certificate, a government database, or parental testimony as corroborating evidence.

The project is understood not as a form of legal identity conferred by a nation-state, but as a social identity layer established by the individual concerned. It may find application in informal contexts in which an organization requires only a document bearing a person's name and photograph — for instance, within communities, club memberships, informal housing arrangements, inclusive healthcare provision, peer-to-peer transactions, and other circumstances in which government-issued identification is not a legal prerequisite.

This distinction is reinforced through visual and linguistic design. The declaration is composed in Esperanto and incorporates imagery associated with peace and voluntary community, such as the Esperanto flag, Jubilee symbol and artwork of a peace dove in a blue sky. In a manner analogous to Eugène Lanti's conception of anationalism, the inclusive ideals underlying Esperanto may function symbolically as a language and culture of refuge for individuals who do not identify with, or who wish to distance themselves from, their country of birth, birth culture or native language. ^[45]

Technical Specification

Memdeklaro is implemented as a free, privacy-oriented, client-side web application; the generator is publicly accessible via the project's website, and its implementation is openly available for inspection.

Memdeklaro declarations are self-declared and self-printed by the individual themselves. There is no issuing authority, no application process, and no requirement for third party approval.

To make a self-declaration, Memdeklaro provides a standardized template, released into the public domain, comprising a front and back design expressing an Esperanto and peace-oriented theme, together with open source generator software that imprints a user's self-chosen data onto that template. The same data is additionally expressed in JSON-LD format, compatible with the verifiable credentials standard described below.

The generator can be used by visiting the Memdeklaro website and entering the following self-declared data into the web form:

1. a self-chosen first name;
2. a self-chosen surname;
3. a declared date of birth;
4. an optional personal note;
5. a photograph in JPEG format;
6. a signature in JPEG format.

Submitting the form subsequently produces the declaration which can be downloaded immediately and free of charge. No data is transmitted to any Memdeklaro server; processing occurs entirely within the user's browser, and the resulting data never leaves the browser, unless the user chooses to download it to their device's persistent storage.

Several output formats are produced:

1. a front-and-back identification card template rendered in JPEG format, suitable for digital use or for physical printing as a business card or CR-80 plastic card;

2. a PDF document containing the declaration in graphical form together with a corresponding QR code;
3. a JSON-LD self-attested verifiable credential, which the user may sign with their own cryptographic key and import into a compatible digital wallet.

Use of the web-based generator is not mandatory. Because the underlying template is public domain and openly available in the project's source repository, a user may instead download the template directly and populate it using conventional image editing software, without using the Memdeklaro website at all.

The Memdeklaro project itself does not print or ship physical cards. A user who wishes to hold a physical copy of their declaration must print it themselves, whether as a business card or as a CR-80 plastic card. This provides a dual benefit: firstly, personal data is never disclosed to the Memdeklaro server; secondly, the user does not need to provide a shipping address, which could cause privacy concerns or create barriers to access.

Memdeklaro does not maintain a registry of generated declarations, and, as a self-declaration, does not verify or attest to the data it contains. In this respect, a Memdeklaro declaration is closer in kind to a self-asserted social media profile, a portfolio, a chosen username, or a name badge, than to a government-issued credential: it allows its holder to state a self-chosen name, but the statement carries no institutional backing beyond the holder's own assertion.

The credential model is compatible with the broader architecture of decentralized and self-sovereign identity.^{[46] [47]} Decentralized identifiers (DIDs) are designed such that control of an identifier may be demonstrated without the permission of a centralized identity provider, while verifiable credentials are designed to encode claims together with corresponding cryptographic proofs. Memdeklaro deliberately adopts a simplified implementation: the holder both creates and signs their own declaration, functioning simultaneously as issuer and subject of a self-issued verifiable credential.

The project is released into the public domain, such that the generator, its templates and associated materials may be studied, copied, forked and adapted by others without restriction. These materials may be freely downloaded from the project website at <https://memdeklaro.org>.

Social Use Case

Self-Declaration as an Identity Issuer of Last Resort

An individual may lack access to government documentation while nonetheless possessing a name, relationships, beliefs, community affiliations and an otherwise ordinary social existence. For such individuals, self-declaration provides an accessible means of asserting the identity by which they choose to participate in society.

A self-declaration therefore communicates the following proposition: that the individual presenting the document declares this to be the name and identity by which they wish to be known. As a form of non-government identification, it explicitly does not purport that a government has certified the individual's legal identity.

This carries particular weight where the ordinary channels of naming authority are unavailable or actively hostile to the individual. For example, an adult who has separated from abusive birth parents, and whose government conditions legal registration on parental testimony that will not be given, is not thereby rendered nameless. The absence of a legally recorded name reflects a gap in the administrative record, not a gap in the individual's existence or self-conception. A civil registry entry is understood as evidentiary rather than constitutive of a name: it documents a name in use, rather than conferring that name by its own authority — much as a map's failure to depict a given territory does not cause the territory to cease existing.

Where legal channels for recording a name are foreclosed, the truth of a name reverts to the same source from which it has always ultimately derived: consistent social usage and the individual's own testimony.

The objective of Memdeklaro, accordingly, is to establish an alternative layer of identity which does not depend on the government identity system.

Freedom from Assigned Identity

A particularly significant use case concerns individuals whose birth identity is unwanted, unsafe, or associated with circumstances from which they have since separated. Such circumstances may arise for a range of reasons, including where an individual leaves an abusive family; leaves a coercive religious, cultural or ideological community; is a dissident; is a conscientious objector; or chooses a name more representative of their adult identity.

Broader Freedom of Identity

Traditional identity documentation is typically oriented toward answering three questions: what name was assigned to the individual at birth; who were the individual's parents; and what country claims the individual as a citizen. Memdeklaro instead poses a different set of questions: what does the individual call themselves; what beliefs or personal ties do they wish to express; and what information do they voluntarily choose to communicate. This constitutes a shift from an identity that is assigned to one that is chosen.

The Meaning of a Last Resort

The relevant comparison for Memdeklaro is not between a self-declaration and a government-issued identity document — as established above, a government document may not be an available option. The relevant comparison is between a self-declaration and no identity artifact whatsoever.

The distinction matters in practice. Consider a free health clinic operating on charitable donations, whose staff record each patient for internal purposes but are not legally required to demand government identification. A patient who arrives without any form of identification may nonetheless be turned away, not because the law requires it, but because staff, uncertain how to proceed, default to requesting some form of documentary confirmation — a library card, a transit pass, a utility bill, or similar — many of which require government identification to obtain. Where a patient has no artifact of any kind to present, staff may have no basis on which to proceed, and the encounter may end before it begins.

A self-declaration may change the shape of this encounter without guaranteeing its outcome. It provides a physical or digital artifact bearing a name, a photograph and a declaration number that staff can record for their own files, exactly as they would record information from any other form of identification. The declaration does not compel acceptance, and an organization retains full discretion to decline it. An artifact bearing a self-chosen name and photograph, even one carrying no institutional backing, could, however, open a conversation that could end in case-by-case acceptance, in a considered refusal, or in a proposed accommodation.

There is also a less tangible benefit. The declaration gives a self-chosen identity a concrete, presentable existence. A self-chosen name that exists only as an internal conviction is, for many people, qualitatively different from a name given physical or digital form: printed on a card, held in the hand, and easily presentable to another person.

A Document for Everyone

Memdeklaro is not restricted only to individuals who lack access to government identification; anyone may generate a self-declaration, regardless of their documentary status. This is a deliberate design choice, and it serves a purpose beyond accessibility alone.

If a self-declared identity document were used exclusively by people unable to obtain any other form of identification, its use could function as a visible marker of exclusion — presenting a self-declaration would signal, in effect, that the holder could not obtain anything else.

Where the declaration is instead used by a broad range of people for a broad range of reasons, its presentation carries a different meaning: not an admission of exclusion, but a choice — an expressed preference for an empowering, privacy-respecting, non-national means of self-presentation. Broad, voluntary adoption of the document by people who have various options available to them would allow its use by those who do not have such options to pass without the risk of stigma as described in §2.

Similarly, because the declaration's visual and linguistic design draws on Esperanto rather than any national symbolism, it is not tied to any particular country, ethnicity or culture, and is accordingly usable by anyone regardless of background or location.

Memdeklaro, therefore, presents self-declaration as an expression of agency that anyone can make regardless of status.

Self-Declaration as a Form of Self-Publishing

A parallel may be drawn with the domain of publishing. Under a traditional publishing model, the publisher functions as a permitted intermediary between author and reader, retaining the discretion to decline works it considers unsuitable or without merit — the author reaches the reader only through the publisher's permission, and, analogously, the musician reaches the listener only through the record label's permission. Under a self-publishing model, by contrast, the author and musician are able to publish independently, without censorship or gatekeeping.

In traditional identity management, the issuer functions as the permitted third party standing between the claimant and an institutionally verified identity document. Under a self-declaration model, the holder instead functions as the ultimate authority over their own identity, serving simultaneously as claimant and issuer of a self-declared identity document.

Common Law Precedent for Usage-Based Naming

Memdeklaro's treatment of the self-chosen name is not without legal precedent. Under English common law, a name became a person's legal name through consistent public usage rather than through parental testimony, birth registration, or state decree: an individual could adopt a new name simply by beginning to use it, and the name became legally effective as others came to recognize and address the person by it. This principle persists in the common law name change doctrine still recognized in most US states, under which a name may be lawfully assumed without judicial proceedings, provided the change is not undertaken for a fraudulent purpose.^[48]

Memdeklaro's model can accordingly be understood as an application of a considerably older principle to a documentary form: the truth of a person's name resides in how they introduce themselves and how others come to know them, rather than in an act of certification performed by a birth parent or a state. A related precedent exists in the practice of the stage name, under which an individual constructs a public persona — together with an associated reputation, skill set, and

network of professional vouches — entirely independent of any legally registered name.

The Photograph as an Anti-Impersonation Mechanism

The photograph included in the declaration performs a distinct function: linking a claimed name to a specific physical appearance, thereby making impersonation detectable.

Consider an organization such as a gym that accepts a self-declaration as sufficient proof of identity for membership purposes. The gym may retain a copy of the declaration and issue a membership card bearing the holder's declared name and a barcode. Should the card later be used by someone other than its original holder, staff can compare the cardholder's appearance against the photograph on file and detect the discrepancy. This is similar to the layman's identity check routinely performed when comparing a person against a government-issued photo ID: a simple comparison between the individual presenting the document and the photograph it contains. The photograph establishes a durable link between that name and a specific individual, sufficient to deter and detect impersonation.

Self-Declaration as a Foundation for Reputation

Memdeklaro intentionally does not certify reputational or professional claims: it cannot state that its holder is, for example, a doctor, a published author or an accountant; that they are financially solvent; or that they hold a given qualification. Its function is limited to establishing a self-chosen name and photograph as a foundation of identity.

The declaration functions as a blank slate upon which reputation may subsequently be constructed, rather than as a document that asserts reputation itself — comparable to the manner in which participation in social media and online communities allows an individual to select a username and accumulate a consistent reputation independent of legal identity.

Some transactions require no accumulated reputation and depend on payment alone. Others, such as employment, may require a vouch from a previous employer, a portfolio, or a qualification.

Where an individual obtains a qualification issued in their self-chosen name, the declaration allows it to be linked to their broader social identity. Claims of this kind rest on independent means: an educational certificate issued to the declared name, a transit card bearing the declared name and photograph, or a healthcare provider recording the declared name, date of birth and declaration number.

Because the declaration may be linked to a decentralized identifier (DID), subsequent verifiable credentials issued to that DID can link independently verified claims to the same underlying identity.

A particular scenario where reputation may be relevant is in informal housing. Consider an informal landlord approached by a prospective tenant who has no government-issued identification. Absent any artifact at all, the landlord may decline outright, filling the gap with inference rather than evidence: perhaps the applicant cannot be trusted to pay rent, perhaps their conduct is the reason no institution has documented them, perhaps taking them on as a tenant is simply too great a risk to accept sight unseen. A self-declaration does not resolve any of these questions on its own, but it can give the landlord something concrete enough to work with — a name, a photograph, a basis for a conversation rather than a closed door — and some landlords may be willing, on this basis, to offer a short trial period rather than an outright refusal: one month's stay, with continuation conditioned on how it goes.

Over that month, the landlord is no longer reasoning from absence; they observe whether the tenant pays rent on time, keeps the apartment clean, and lives quietly without disturbance to neighbors. Where this proves to be the case, the earlier uncertainty is not merely set aside but positively answered, replaced by direct evidence that the tenant is reliable — evidence sufficient, in practice, for the arrangement to continue and the tenancy to become long-term. The declaration did not itself establish that the tenant was trustworthy, and could not have; it functioned only to open the door to a limited trial period. What the tenant made of that opening — the rent paid, the good conduct, the apartment kept in good order — was entirely their own doing, and it is this, not the declaration, that the resulting trust actually rests on.

The overall model is accordingly meritocratic and permissionless: an individual transacts and builds reputation under a name of their own choosing, judged by their own actions rather than permanently constrained by the circumstances of their birth.

Discussion

The problem Memdeklaro addresses is not authentication in the conventional security sense, but identity and exclusion. Modern identity infrastructure functions adequately where a government record exists, is accessible, and is accepted by other institutions; it functions less well where the foundational record is missing, disputed, inaccessible, or controlled by a hostile third party.

Self-declaration is conceived as a mechanism of last resort, and its scope should be stated precisely. It provides no institutional verification of the claims it contains, and this is by design rather than omission: verification requires the cooperation of a third party — usually a government or a birth parent — and it is precisely the unavailability of that cooperation that defines the population the project addresses. A self-declaration cannot substitute for situations where institutional proof is specifically required, such as at a border crossing or in a formal know-your-customer banking check. Its usefulness is accordingly confined to contexts in which a business, organization or community is willing to accept an unverified but consistent claim of identity.

This scope raises an obvious objection: if anyone may generate a declaration, including a declaration falsely attributed to another person, what does the document actually guarantee? Two responses may be given. First, as discussed in §8, the photograph accompanying the declaration performs an anti-impersonation function independent of any claim to institutional verification: it links a declared name to a specific physical appearance, allowing an accepting party to detect, at the point of use, whether the person presenting the document matches the person described by it. Second, the self-signed verifiable credential described in §7 provides consistency rather than certification — the same declaration, tied to the same cryptographic key, can be shown to originate from the same holder across repeated presentations over time, distinguishing a stable, ongoing claim of identity from an ad hoc fabrication.

A further question concerns why self-declaration should be treated as a legitimate basis for identity at all, in the absence of institutional certification. §8 provides the paper's answer: a civil registry entry is properly understood as evidentiary rather than constitutive of a name, recording a name already established through usage rather than creating it by its own authority. Where the administrative channels historically responsible for producing this evidentiary record are absent or actively hostile, the underlying and historically prior source of a name's truth — its consistent use in

practice — remains available and unaffected. Self-declaration does not invent a new basis for identity in this sense; it reasserts a basis for identity that predates civil registration and continues to operate independently of it.

This does not diminish the value of formal remedies where they exist. Procedures for late birth registration and statelessness determination can resolve some cases, and UNHCR recognizes their importance where they are accessible. §4 documents three successful cases, underscoring that these remedies can offer a positive outcome when they can be reached. Their accessibility, however, varies substantially by jurisdiction, and in the specific circumstances this paper addresses — hostility, state refusal, missing foundational records — such procedures may be unavailable altogether. Self-declaration is conceptualized as a last resort alternative to these procedures for the population left unreached by them.

Conclusion

Dependence on centralized identity systems produces exclusion when documentation is unavailable, inaccessible, or withheld by a hostile third party, with consequences extending into employment, housing, healthcare, marriage, and ordinary participation in society. Prior projects — the Nansen Passport, the World Passport, Digitalcourage's Lichtbildausweis, and Bitnation — demonstrate that alternatives to conventional national identification have repeatedly been attempted, each addressing a different facet of the same underlying problem.

Memdeklaro's approach differs from these precedents in scope rather than ambition. It does not attempt to constitute an alternative recognized institution, maintain a registry, or build upon testimony from a person's birth parents or country of birth. It instead provides a mechanism through which an individual may generate a free, self-issued, and privacy-preserving declaration of a self-chosen name and photograph — a foundation, established through consistent usage and self-testimony rather than institutional certification, upon which reputation and further independently verified claims may subsequently be built.

The project challenges the assumption that identity must originate from the circumstances of a person's birth or the testimony of a third party. §4's case studies illustrate what is at stake in concrete terms: restoring documentary access, however partial, was sufficient in each instance to transform an excluded life. A person whom no institution will document nevertheless retains a name, relationships, beliefs, and a social existence. Memdeklaro provides a means of expressing those facts without requiring permission from an authority unwilling to grant it. In doing so, it aims to preserve the possibility of personal identity and social and economic participation in the case where official identity has failed.

References

- [1] The Economist. (2018, December 18). Establishing identity is a vital, risky and changing business.
- [2] Caplan, J., & Torpey, J. (Eds.). (2001). Documenting individual identity: The development of state practices in the modern world. Princeton University Press.
- [3] Elliot, R. (2006). An early experiment in national identity cards: The battle over registration in the First World War. Twentieth Century British History.
- [4] Robertson, C. (2010). The passport in America: The history of a document. Oxford University Press.
- [5] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (n.d.). Stateless people.
- [6] Boyce, D. (2026, February 17). Her parents didn't register her Colorado birth, and she has been stateless ever since. But that may soon change. Colorado Public Radio.
- [7] Williams, S. H. (2023). Divorcing your parents. SSRN.
- [8] Morgunov, S., Stern, D. L., & Ebel, F. (2024, May 3). Ukrainian men abroad voice anger over pressure to return home to fight. The Washington Post.
- [9] Slipowitz, A., White, J., & Gorokhovskaia, Y. (2024). No way in or out: Authoritarian controls on the freedom of movement. Freedom House.
- [10] Amnesty International. (2026, July 21). Russia: Draft law imposing sweeping restrictions on government critics abroad weaponizes punishment to silence dissent.
- [11] Baroch, P. (2020, April 17). With each person left living on the streets, we are losing as a society. European Network on Statelessness.
- [12] Movement Advancement Project. (2022). The ID Divide: How Barriers to ID Impact Different Communities and Affect Us All.

- [13] Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Harvard University Press.
- [14] Fisher, B. L. (2024). Citizenship, federalism, and delayed birth registration in the United States. *Akron Law Review*.
- [15] Arendt, H. (1951). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- [16] Prais, V. (2020, October 9). Proving who I am: The plight of people in detention without proof of legal identity. *Penal Reform International*.
- [17] Berliner Bäder-Betriebe. (2023). Einlass in die Freibäder nur mit amtlichem Foto-Ausweisdokument.
- [18] taz. (2025). taz-Sommerserie: Berlin geht baden.
- [19] dieDatenschützer Rhein Main. (2023). Berlin: Freibad für alle – gegen Ausschluss durch Online-Ticket-Zwang und Ausweispflicht.
- [20] Verwaltungsgericht Berlin. (2026, May). Judgment concerning identification controls and security measures in Berlin's public swimming pools.
- [21] A.T. Kearney (commissioned by Visa Inc.). (2018). *Digital Payments and the Global Informal Economy*.
- [22] Gren, N., Abdelhady, D., & Joormann, M. (2023). Unmasking the Impact of Bureaucratic Violence. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees / Refuge: Revue canadienne sur les réfugiés*.
- [23] Sanders, C., Burnett, K., Lam, S., Hassan, M., & Skinner, K. (2020). “You need ID to get ID”: A scoping review of personal identification as a barrier to and facilitator of the social determinants of health in North America. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.
- [24] United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III), December 10, 1948.
- [25] Berlin, I. (1969). *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Oxford University Press.

- [26] King, M. L. Jr. (1963). I have a dream. Speech delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963.
- [27] UNHCR. (2020). Faces of Statelessness in the Czech Republic.
- [28] Siu, R. (2026, July 14). Kwong Wan Lo sneaked into Australia 45 years ago. He has lived in limbo until now. ABC News.
- [29] Goodwin-Gill, G. S. (2000, May). Opinion: The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the obligations of States under Articles 25, 27 and 28, with particular reference to refugees without identity or travel documents. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- [30] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (n.d.). Registration as an identity management process.
- [31] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (n.d.). The International Committee of the Red Cross Emergency Travel Document.
- [32] Aufenthaltsverordnung (AufenthV) vom 25. November 2004 (BGBl. I S. 2945), § 4 Abs. 6.
- [33] BGH, Urteil vom 17.05.2017 – XII ZB 126/15.
- [34] California Department of Motor Vehicles. (n.d.). AB 60 driver's licenses. State of California.
- [35] Secretaría de Gobernación, Instituto Nacional de Migración. (2015). Programa Temporal de Regularización Migratoria [Decree]. Government of Mexico.
- [36] Citizenship by Investment Unit, St. Kitts and Nevis. (n.d.). St. Kitts and Nevis Citizenship by Investment FAQs. Government of St. Kitts and Nevis.
- [37] Liberland. (n.d.). Intro.
- [38] Próspera. (n.d.). Overview of e-Residency.
- [39] Talent Beyond Boundaries. (n.d.). Case study: Fadi.

- [40] Giaimo, C. (2017, February 7). The little-known passport that protected 450,000 refugees. Atlas Obscura.
- [41] World Citizen Government. (n.d.). What is the World Passport?
- [42] Digitalcourage e.V. (n.d.). Gadget: Lichtbildausweis – mit selbst wählbaren Daten.
- [43] Finyear. (2018, October 15). Bitnation releases first batch of Vienna Convention compliant diplomatic blockchain passports.
- [44] Memdeklaro. (n.d.). Memdeklaro: Self-Declaration of Identity.
- [45] Gobbo, F. (2017). Beyond the nation-state? The ideology of the Esperanto movement between neutralism and multilingualism. Social Inclusion.
- [46] World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). (2026, July 30). Verifiable Credentials Overview v1.0.
- [47] N. Naik, & P. Jenkins. (2022). Is Self-Sovereign Identity Really Sovereign? 2022 IEEE International Symposium on Systems Engineering (ISSE).
- [48] Rennick, R. M. (1984). On the Right of Exclusive Possession of a Family Name. Names.

Acknowledgments

This paper was researched and written by the Memdeklaro Public Domain Initiative. Claude (Anthropic) and ChatGPT (OpenAI) were used as writing and research aids during drafting: ChatGPT assisted in producing an initial prose draft from the author's outline and notes; Claude assisted with editing for consistency of style, verifying factual claims and citations, identifying relevant legal and academic sources, and stress-testing the paper's arguments against likely objections. All claims, sources and conclusions were reviewed and are the responsibility of the author.