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# **Professor Amanda Hammar: Introducing CERTIZENS**

[CERTIZENS Africa Podcast](https://nyheder.ku.dk/podcasts/certizens-africa-podcast/)

Episode 1 transcript

**About the podcast**

This is the podcast of the [Certifications of Citizenship in Africa (CERTIZENS)](https://teol.ku.dk/english/dept/certizens-certifications-of-citizenship-in-africa/) project, which considers how politics, policy and practice relating to citizen classification, certification and identification shape both citizens and states in selected African contexts. The project is led by [Professor Amanda Hammar](https://teol.ku.dk/cas/staff/?pure=en/persons/186095) from the Centre of African Studies (CAS), University of Copenhagen, in collaboration with teams at CAS and the University of Ghana, Legon, and Makerere University in Uganda.

Through conversations, interviews and debates among scholars, practitioners and policy makers, the CERTIZENS Africa podcast provides a platform to explore the complexities, challenges and implications of current and emerging systems of citizen classification certification and identification, and the forms of ID they generate, both in African and global contexts.

**About Episode 1**

Project Leader Amanda Hammar introduces the CERTIZENS Africa project, in conversation with Alice Troy-Donovan. What is at stake in how systems of classification, certification and identification are used to shape citizens and states, in African contexts and globally? What should we make of the double-edged nature of emerging systems of citizen registration and certification, including biometrics?

More about Amanda Hammar: [Academic profile](https://teol.ku.dk/cas/staff/?pure=en/persons/186095)

If you have comments, suggestions or would like to be part of a future CERTIZENS podcast, write to us at [certizens@teol.ku.dk](mailto:certizens@teol.ku.dk)

**Transcript**

**Amanda Hammar**

From voter registration to accessing health care and other public services or getting a SIM card ID, documents are indispensable to everyday life on the African continent. The number of people living without ID documents has reached an epidemic scale. They make up 50% of the estimated 1 billion people living worldwide without formal proof of identity.

My name is Amanda Hammar, professor of African Studies at Copenhagen University, and you're listening to the CERTIZENS Africa Podcast.

This is a platform that brings into conversation diverse scholars, practitioners, and policymakers engaged with the complex questions and practices related to citizen certification and identification processes, with a particular but not sole focus on Africa.

In this first episode, I'm in conversation with Alice Troy-Donovan, a colleague in the CERTIZENS project. We'll be discussing the project’s origins and core concerns. We'll also be talking briefly about what you can look forward to in future podcasts.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

Hi Amanda, thanks very much for joining me. Let's start by talking about the genesis of CERTIZENS. How did the project come about?

**Amanda Hammar**

I guess it has an origin before the actual project itself in the sense that I have been thinking about the meaning of citizenship for a very long time, and the relationship between states and citizens for a long time. But the more specific prompt came when I was doing research on urban displacement and resettlement in Zimbabwe. This is already some decades ago and one of the issues that came up in this was about property, an unusual gift, you could say, of houses to people who had been former squatters – they had never owned properties before at all, had never been secure in their lives where they’ve lived.

So the Bulawayo City Council – in Zimbabwe's second largest city – affirmed that the only thing that people who had actually been offered these houses, the only thing that they needed to do was to come and bring their ID documents and they would get their lease agreements and so on. And it turned out in this community of around 200 households, up to 2/3 of people had no ID documents at all, or certainly not the kind of ID documents that would be proof enough of official citizenship to get their lease agreements. So this started an interesting exploration of the patterns of exclusion and the extent to which people in Zimbabwe lacked formal ID documents and grew to a sort of a consciousness about how widespread this was on the African continent and globally.

And from there I began to have conversations with other interested colleagues at the Centre of African Studies and beyond and, eventually, including teams of colleagues in Ghana and Uganda about a project that would explore national systems of identification, registration, classification and what this meant for citizenship and states, and the relationship between them.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

IDs are of course incredibly important to everyday life in most parts of the world. What is significant about the African context?

**Amanda Hammar**

I guess there are some things that are not particularly African, but others that are.

First of all, one has to think about the histories of citizen making and citizenship making in Africa, which has a long colonial history. I won't go into a lot of detail about that, but in terms of boundaries and movements of people over time and who is recognised in which different historical periods, both the colonial and the postcolonial, in terms of belonging to a nation and or not belonging. So those kinds of movements and those kinds of boundaries, built on certain kinds of histories, is quite particular to the continent, but also to particular African countries on the continent. That would be one thing.

In more recent times, say the last five decades or more, in the postcolonial shift of independence and so on, that hasn't meant stability. Particularly it has meant or has included a lot of conflicts. A lot of wars, crises, lots of movement of people across borders. You know the numbers of refugees are enormous. The number of internally displaced people is enormous. So again, the issue of people’s identities and belonging and ID systems that affirm their entitlements to belong and so on. That is something that is mapped across the continent in terms of statelessness. So it's not just lack of ID documents. It's also lack of a position within a state that protects you. So ID documents are very significant around the continent in terms of movement, displacement and so on.

But then there's this kind of more recent move, which is a global move towards digitalization. Obviously that's not new globally, but there's this intensification of digitalising everything and including digitalising ID systems. So that has become a sort of a global trend that has translated into expectations of African countries to progress and be as modern as others with these digital fast ID systems. Alongside that is not just the digitalization trend but also the neoliberal pressure on financialization. So, for example, lots of pressure from the World Bank and other agencies to ensure that everyone can be a consumer or can access finance and the idea that financially including everybody is the way towards progress and growth and so on.

At the same time, we have the SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals – which were from 2015 and SDG #16.9 that emphasises legal identity for all. That opens all sorts of ideas, all sorts of projects, of how to deliver such systems, with the African continent being – as we’ve already said – an area of huge absence and lack of formal IDs. So that again has opened an area of growth, you could say, in the development sector on the provision of IDs.

And the last one is to do with securitisation. So the parts of the African continent representing or being spaces of insecurity in themselves, but also related to global questions of security around ISIS, and also migration security. So ID systems are becoming more and more projected from outside but also internalised as forms of surveillance control related to questions of security. So the continent is a huge territory for all of this to be played out on.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

Yes indeed. So maybe we could zoom in on the specific case countries within CERTIZENS.

**Amanda Hammar**

We've got a project in Ghana and a project in Uganda. These are countries that have fairly recently, in the last five to 10 years, had their own national registration reforms, so things are happening which raise questions about how citizens get classified, what technologies are used, what bureaucracies are reshaped because of what politics are at play. All of that is happening in both these countries in very very different ways, which we are attentive to.

There are four or five researchers in each of those countries, but in addition to these overall national systems, there are projects within CERTIZENS which look at the effects directly on certain kinds of differentiated citizens.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

So, it's clear that IDs are incredibly important in multiple different sites and scales across Africa. Maybe you could tell us more specifically about a couple of projects within CERTIZENS. What are they looking at in this huge field?

**Amanda Hammar**

Yeah, that's a good question, because the project itself obviously has limitations. Just to say on the side: we're interested in conversations with people doing work on all these multiple levels, both related to the African context, but also elsewhere. So CERTIZENS as a project has its focus, which I'll come back to in a moment. But it also has this great interest in connections and recognising these patterns and practices elsewhere that are also showing up in their particular ways in particular countries. I just wanted to make a note of that.

So on one level – what we call the ‘intimate level’ – the project is looking at how people live with experience of both having and not having formal ID documents, as these [ID] systems themselves are changing. In the Ghana case, at the intimate level, we have one PhD student who's looking at what experiences the Fulani in Ghana have. Even if certain individuals or communities have been there for decades, the Fulani are largely considered not Ghanaian.

On the side of Uganda, on the intimate level, we have projects looking at the Maragoli, which is a community recently excluded from the Constitution, which names over 20 ethnic minorities or ethnic groups that do not constitute citizens. One of our colleagues is looking at the experiences of Maragoli in accessing or being excluded from national ID documents. And the Banyarwanda is another group [which another researcher is looking at]. But also, one of our PhD researchers is looking at the experiences of marginalised ‘ghetto youth’ and in so-called ‘ghetto’ Kampala.

All of that [research at the intimate level] relates to these other layers. These bureaucratic layers, these policy layers, with the politics or histories of these systems.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

I think what you just said really brings out this double-edged nature of identification systems. They have the power to empower people and they also have the power to exclude. Maybe you could talk a little bit more about that.

**Amanda Hammar**

I can say a bit about this paradox of ID systems. Let's just focus on national ID cards for a start. It’s nothing new that there's this recognition of the double-edgedness, as you say, about them. For a long time, people have recognised that to receive an ID document is to be recognised by a state, and with that comes a certain level of security. A certain level of entitlement to rights as well as obligations and accessing public services, banking, etc. And that is profoundly important for most people.

On the other hand, in establishing and also making more efficient these systems (which also the digitalization trend is arguing for), what you do is include in formalised registration systems – whether they're digitalized or not – the information about all your citizens, or at least those that you've chosen or constitutionally included in the framing of citizenship. And with that, of course, brings issues of privacy questions and surveillance and all in the name of security.

So, you have on the one hand an ID document that entitles a person to speak back to the state by being recognised by the state, and at the same time you're empowering the state to see you too. You're becoming more legible. In the language of James Scott, you are more legible. You're more readable, you're more able to be found or read in certain ways, with all the implications that that can have both in terms of service provision but in terms of surveillance and control.

But one of the things that I think is particularly interesting, or I've just begun thinking about, is this financialization, another paradox. On the one hand, you are, let’s say, empowering people to be better consumers. You're giving them access to banks and finance and purchase, but on the other side of that is this neoliberal impulse to manipulate you as a consumer. It's not so much the state question, but it's this double-edged side of becoming a more effective, empowered consumer who's also being manipulated as a consumer.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

I think it's really interesting because the description of CERTIZENS talks about state-making and citizen-making, but you're also talking about this third actor, the private sector. This is also about the making of the private sector in Africa.

**Amanda Hammar**

Absolutely, it is. Part of the sublanguage of CERTIZENS is the political economy of citizenship or the political economy of IDs, alongside the academic language, the cultural politics of who and what makes a person a person and so on. So what it means is that when we talk about these political economies of citizenship and of ID documents, there is a huge aspect of private sector interest and benefit in terms of the design manufacture and the distribution of ID systems in themselves. So, while digitalization is the thing of the present and the thing of the future, what it has done is not just increased access to or the production of ID documents in national systems. It has also generated and expanded the number of private sector actors that are coming into this realm of production, design, promotion, production and maintenance of ID systems. When you start to look at national systems, as some of our colleagues are, we are asking questions about who is delivering, who is designing, where are the consumables coming from? How does the move from production of paper IDs or cards to biometric cards generate forms of private sector enterprise? So there's an enormous realm, and it is very much evident that the private sector and states are collaborating very closely. There's the private sector and lenders, the World Bank, other international development banks. Even some foundations, like the Gates Foundation, are very actively in relationship with private sector actors. It's a whole realm that is becoming more and more visible. Such involvement of the private sector in something so fundamental to sovereignty and citizenship and statelessness raises some really challenging questions.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

So one way in which the state is still a key actor in these processes is in the centralisation, or in some cases the hyper centralisation, of ID systems across African states. What is the significance of centralisation?

**Amanda Hammar**

In countries like Denmark, or Northern Europe, unlike America for example, citizens are used to centralised identification systems. The CPR number in Denmark and others in the rest of Scandinavia at least, and so on. And there’s a question of trust involved with that, trust in the state that the holding of such a comprehensive card and a centralised card is not entirely problematic. Well, it is problematic, but maybe the trust issue convinces people not to be concerned, and if you have one of these cards, you do receive services, you do receive access, so it's an accepted form of centralised identification.

There are differences in African settings such as Ghana or Uganda or, let's say, Nigeria, where I recently heard that prior to the centralization of national ID systems there was something like 16 different identification systems, localised or varied or decentralised. This is the same in Ghana also in Uganda. What happens when you take all those alternatives and concentrate them in this very centralised system? On the one hand there's just the technical pragmatic thing of ensuring that every single citizen actually gets the card in Ghana. It's [called] the Ghana Card. And what happens when capacity to do that and resources to do that don’t match with the policies and legislation which says that you require this card for all these different services. At the same time, when you formalise and centralise in that way there are a whole range of different categories of people, communities of people, who may have been on the edge of formal citizenship. I mean they may be recognised with certain kinds of IDs locally, which means they access services, health care, education and so on locally. But the minute you centralise that, you remove their access. You remove the recognition of them as citizens, whether [or not] they were previously local citizens. Now there can only be national citizens. And what does that do to access and exclusion?

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

That process of centralisation is happening in Ghana right now. Could you tell us how that's going?

**Amanda Hammar**

The process of centralisation in Ghana is around the Ghana Card. Ghana is at the stage where legally, formally, the only form of national recognition of your identity comes through the Ghana Card. And we see in the media and [through the research of] our PhD students and other researchers evidence of the levels of exclusion even for those citizens who can formally get the Ghana Card, but haven't got it yet. Maybe they haven't got their birth certificate or the documentation that you need to first get your Ghana Card. There are even situations where suddenly they can’t access a SIM card. But I do also just want to mention the fact that any kind of national ID system doesn't just happen on its own. It’s related to a birth certificate, to other forms of identification that all have their own challenges and problems. There's nothing automatic. There's nothing simple, and there's nothing neutral about all the different kinds of ID documents that come into play in one individual's life.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

And of course, the voter ID card is another key form of identification, isn't it?

**Amanda Hammar**

Yeah, it's not yet clear what the relationship is between the Ghana Card and the voter ID registration card. A national ID is crucial for a voter ID, but in some countries voter IDs themselves act as forms of ID, so there's a lot of different ways in which ID documents of various kinds have been acting as verifications of people’s citizenship. I say ‘citizenship’ in inverted commas, because it may not be actually linked to their constitutional citizenship or their national citizenship, but forms of local citizenship.

**Alice Troy-Donovan**

So what can we look forward to in future podcast episodes?

**Amanda Hammar**

So in future episodes we're going to be talking with a mix of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who not only in the African context, are actively engaged with the kinds of complex questions that CERTIZENS is addressing. But in our forthcoming episode, we're really delighted to feature a talk by Dr Bronwen Manby, who's a Senior Policy Fellow at the London School of Economics and a member of our own Scientific Advisory Board. Bronwen has extensive experience in the fields of citizenship, statelessness and human rights, very widely published and also engaged as an advisor and practitioner in the field. So we're thrilled that that's what we can feature in our next episode.

**Amanda Hammar**

The CERTIZENS podcast is produced by Amanda Hammar and Alice Troy-Donovan, with the support of the Centre of African Studies at the University of Copenhagen and the Danida Fellowship Centre. The theme music is Resonance by Air Tone. This podcast is released under a Creative Commons licence.

Thank you for listening.