African nations use SIM card question to mandate control

During the implementation of Rica in SA, more than 1 million SIMs, largely of the poor and migrants unable to provide the necessary identity documents or proof of residence, were disconnected. For the system to work, there needs to be an overwhelming deterrent against non-compliance. This is reflected in the explanation of the chief of staff to the president of Nigeria at an unprecedented meeting between the regulator, telecom CEOs and the heads of the main security agencies last month, at which he implored operators to take the matter seriously, noting that “security and safety of the people is number one on the president’s agenda”.

Operators were advised that continued noncompliance would lead to a 200,000 naira ($1,000) fine for every noncompliant card that had not been disconnected, and that all businesses must respect the law or risk their licences being revoked. Leaving aside MTN's inexplicably risky behaviour for a publicly listed company operating in a regulated sector, the Nigerian Communications Commission has also now argued itself into a corner from which retreat may remain defeat.

The rationale for restricting the mass legitimate use of a service is to prevent its limited criminal use, yet there is little evidence of the feasibility of mandatory SIM registration, never mind its effectiveness. In this way, it is very much akin to the kind of all-pervasive net cast over the visa system in SA to stop the limited number of cases of child trafficking with arguably similarly negative unintended consequences for the economy and society.

Even nonsecurity motivations for SIM registration have had to acknowledge the facility of relying on the process to provide reliable data. The International Telecommunications Union, the United Nations agency responsible for global ICT statistics, initially supported SIM registration to improve the accuracy of their indicators. But the widespread registration of SIMs by surrogates to enable those without identity documents, a physical address or legal travel documents to acquire cellphones, as well as extensive sharing, redistribution and theft of SIM cards across Africa have made this impractical.

In most wealthy countries, where public policy processes require evidence of effectiveness, SIM registration has been rejected. What is of concern is that crime-weary South Africans... have accepted the veil of surveillance