



## Book Review

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Maren Elfert and Christian Ydesen  
*Global Governance of Education: The  
Historical and Contemporary Entangle-  
ments of UNESCO, the OECD and the  
World Bank*

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This book explores the role of three key international organisations—UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank—established in the aftermath of the Second World War as part of the multilateral world order, in promoting and shaping education and educational policies across the globe. Over the past decades, a substantial body of scholarship has shed light on the influence of these organisations in the global education landscape. Researchers have highlighted their role in setting policy agendas, establishing frameworks to evaluate and compare educational performance across national boundaries, and producing powerful educational imaginaries that define what education should achieve on a global scale. These organisations operate within what scholars often refer to as a “globalized education complex”—a system where educational norms, goals, and metrics are increasingly standardised and informed by transnational policy networks.

Although these organisations have already been the focus of significant scholarly attention, this book makes a compelling contribution in two critical ways. First, it offers an approach that moves beyond viewing these organisations as either isolated entities or a homogeneous network. By taking their distinct political

mandates, ideological commitments, and interactions seriously, the book provides rich insights into the converging and diverging characteristics of UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank. Secondly, by adopting a historical lens, the authors address a critical gap in understanding how these organisations emerged, how their roles evolved, how power dynamics between them shifted over time, and how this influenced their institutional identities and policy agendas.

This book is uniquely grounded in two complementary research projects: Christian Ydesen’s work on the OECD and Maren Elfert’s research on the history of educational planning, particularly focusing on UNESCO and the World Bank. By combining their expertise and extensive historical data, the authors provide a nuanced analysis of the complex entanglements between these organisations. Its rich narrative is supported by comprehensive archival materials. Additionally, interviews with around 40 educational professionals provide unique and sometimes salient insights into the dynamics and inner workings of these organisations.

Conceptually, the book is equally strong. The book is grounded in the concept of “global governance” as an analytical perspective, which has its roots in International Relations and critiques the limitations of realist accounts that centralise the role of nation-states in governance practices. A global governance perspective focuses on the dynamic interplay between local, national, regional, and global levels. As described by John Ruggie, it represents “*governance* in the absence of *government*,” encompassing actors character-

ised by their diverse involvement and reach within global networks of relations among institutions, individuals, and technologies (Ruggie 1982; 2014). These networks form complex assemblages that shape governance structures and outcomes. The book adopts a constructivist approach, emphasizing how these structures are socially constructed and constantly evolving.

The book consists of eight chapters, following a largely chronological structure, with some chapters having a more conceptual focus. The first chapter sets the stage by outlining the stakes of the study and presenting the conceptual framework that guides the analysis, introducing constructivist-ideationalist and materialist theories of global governance as the key lens to analyse the unfolding interactions of the IOs.

The second chapter delves into what the authors describe as the epistemic and ontological underpinnings of UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank, presenting these organisations as distinct yet interconnected actors in global education governance. UNESCO, initiated in 1946 as a specialised agency of the United Nations, is portrayed as the “idealist” of the trio. Its mission reflects a vision of education as a universal right and a public good, rooted in its humanistic and philosophical foundations. The OECD, by contrast, is characterised as the “master of persuasion,” embodying a pragmatic and instrumental approach to education. For the OECD, education is primarily a means to achieve economic and societal goals, such as workforce development and global competitiveness. The World Bank, established in 1944 within the Bretton Woods framework, is described as the “master of coercion.” Initially focused on post-war reconstruc-

tion, it expanded into education through lending tied to human capital theory. By the 1980s, it leveraged its financial power to align educational investments with economic reforms and structural adjustment policies. This chapter sets a critical foundation for the rest of the book, illustrating how each organisation’s historical mandates and ideological commitments continued to shape their strategies and influence in global education governance.

The third chapter explores the divergent development trajectories of UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank during the 1960s, a period referred to as “the heydays of educational planning” (p194). This era combined boundless optimism about education’s transformative societal potential with its strategic deployment as a tool in Cold War rivalries. The chapter situates the origins of global education planning within this context, highlighting the introduction of metrics, public management tools, and outcome-oriented approaches as foundational elements in the emerging governance framework. A central focus of the chapter is the establishment of key institutions such as the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), a semi-autonomous UNESCO institute aimed at training educational professionals from developing countries, and the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), an autonomous body within the OECD. The authors describe how UNESCO’s role as the leading authority in global education planning was increasingly challenged by the OECD. In the politically charged environment of the Cold War, UNESCO was gradually pushed into a developmental role, while the OECD successfully positioned itself as a

key player in shaping education policies through a more technocratic and data-driven approach.

The fourth chapter examines the ideological and structural tensions between UNESCO and the World Bank over education for development from 1960 to 2015, focusing on two key initiatives: the Cooperative Programme (1964–1989) and the Education for All initiative (launched in 1990). Despite a shared commitment to education for development, the organisations operated with divergent approaches—UNESCO championing education as a human right and public good, and the World Bank viewing it as an investment in economic growth. The first section details the Cooperative Programme, revealing that, despite mutual respect, the collaboration was strained by contrasting governance logics. UNESCO’s educators and philosophers supported newly independent nations’ political aspirations, while the World Bank’s economist-driven agenda aligned with U.S. foreign policy and prioritised productivity, particularly under Robert McNamara. By the late 1970s, these epistemic divides and methodological shifts led to the Programme’s collapse. The second section explores the Education for All initiative, a renewed but equally complex collaboration that reflected ongoing tensions between the organisations’ differing visions for education’s role in development.

Chapter five positions education statistics as “a particular area of negotiations, resistances, inertias, and modifications within the UNESCO-OECD-World Bank triangle” (p. 109). The authors argue that the development of education statistics reflects broader global governance dynamics, shaped by conflicting assumptions, narratives, and bureaucratic prior-

ities. The chapter provides a compelling account of the intense struggles between international organisations over methodologies, indicators, and the production of comparable data. The authors highlight UNESCO’s initial leadership in the 1960s, when it introduced input-output analysis to assess educational efficiency. However, they trace a significant shift in influence over the following decades. By the 1980s, the OECD had begun to assert dominance, promoting international comparative indicators that gradually side-lined UNESCO. By the 1990s, the OECD had established itself as the leading authority in education statistics, reshaping the field with a focus on quantifiable performance metrics.

Far from a celebratory narrative of the OECD’s rise, the chapter presents the pursuit of comparability as an elusive “*fata morgana*” (p. 134)—a mirage of standardization that remains fraught with statistical inaccuracies and persistent incommensurabilities. The analysis offers a fascinating glimpse into how the ongoing quest for universal metrics has been driven by institutional competition and tensions, exposing the contradictions and unresolved disputes that continue to shape global education governance.

In chapter six, the authors turn to the policy concept of lifelong learning, showing how UNESCO’s humanistic ideals converged—and sometimes clashed—with the utilitarian economic frameworks of the OECD and the World Bank. Lifelong learning emerged as a response to the challenges of modern society in the late 1960s, including educational inequality and the critique of capitalism. However, the 1970s economic crises and the rise of neoliberal policies shifted the focus toward efficiency and measurable

outcomes, further entrenching indicators as central to education governance.

Chapter seven shifts focus to a conceptual exploration of the global governance architecture in education, examining the interactions and entanglements between UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank. Drawing on the concepts of “knowledge brokers”—intermediaries facilitating knowledge exchange—and epistemic communities, the authors highlight the creation of networks across these organisations, with conferences serving as key sites for coordination and exchange. A prominent example is Philip Coombs, whose career exemplifies the fluidity of transnational governance. Coombs began as director of an institute linked to the Ford Foundation, later served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs under President Kennedy, and ultimately became UNESCO’s first director of the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). The authors describe figures like Coombs as part of a “sparsely populated caste of bureaucrats” (p. 188), whose influence was pivotal in shaping global education governance. His ability to navigate seamlessly between government, academia, philanthropic organisations, and international institutions illustrates the fluid and permeable boundaries of the emerging transnational governance space.

Chapter eight serves as the book’s conclusion by highlighting what the historical analysis reveals about contemporary relationships and developments in global education governance. It underscores how UNESCO has gradually lost influence to the OECD and the World Bank. The chapter draws attention to the evolving relationship between IOs and powerful nation-states, explaining

how nation-states can leverage these organisations for promoting their interests and agendas. The authors emphasise how the entanglement of these IOs contributes to the creation of universalised global agendas, formulating overarching targets designed to unite all relevant actors within the global education space. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the ongoing process of cooperation and competition among UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank, as they continually negotiate their distinct roles, areas of expertise, and institutional boundaries. This “boundary work” not only allows each organisation to assert its unique contributions but also shapes the broader landscape of global education governance, reinforcing their legitimacy and influence in an increasingly complex and contested policy environment.

The book has several strengths. It offers a compelling and well-documented account, supported by extensive archival research and enriched by insightful interviews that provide interesting details and add depth to the analysis. A notable strength is its ability to bridge empirical data with political science debates, offering a nuanced perspective that situates the evolving roles of UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank within broader institutional and geopolitical contexts. Another key strength lies in the book’s skilful interweaving of institutional history with the broader geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War and its aftermath. This approach offers a sophisticated understanding of how these international organisations both influenced and were influenced by shifting global power structures, illustrating the complex and reciprocal relationships that have shaped global education governance over time. In doing so, the book sets a

benchmark for future research, providing a valuable model for how transnational histories can meaningfully engage with broader questions of global governance.

The authors themselves acknowledge some limitations of the book. First, while it offers an impressive account by focusing on three key organisations that shaped post-World War II educational realities, it does not aim to be exhaustive. Other influential actors, for example the European Union, which also played significant roles in global education, fall outside its scope. Likewise, the impact of business, consultancy, and philanthropic organisations is not a central focus (Ball 2008). Additionally, the book does not extensively explore how specific policies were enacted, resisted, or adapted within local or national contexts. These aspects, while beyond the study's scope, are important areas for further exploration and provide opportunities for future research by other scholars.

Apart from these caveats, there is more that can spark academic discussion. One potential critique concerns the book's choice of "global governance" as an analytical lens. For decades, globalization narratives have emphasised convergence and the diminishing role of the nation-state, with international organisations increasingly shaping global policies. The authors say that to some extent, the book aligns with this literature, explicitly acknowledging its affinities with the widely discussed—yet contested—World Culture Theory (Ramirez, Meyer, and Lerch 2016, p. 5). However, contemporary developments such as geopolitical tensions and the resurgence of neo-nationalism challenge this perspective. Some critics even question whether the multilateral world order ever existed beyond the aspirations of these organisa-

tions. In this light, the book's title raises important questions about the continued relevance of "global governance" as a framework, particularly in an era where nation-states are reasserting control over education agendas.

That said, such critiques would not do the book's argument justice. While it highlights processes of isomorphism and convergence, it offers a more nuanced perspective on global governance. Rather than presenting a deterministic globalization narrative, the book carefully examines how the influence of international organisations is mediated by national and regional contexts. The authors highlight how the politics of convergence operate differently across countries, shaped by local material resources, cultural traditions, and political structures. By foregrounding these complexities, the book moves beyond simplistic interpretations and encourages a more critical and context-sensitive engagement with global governance in education.

One final point that warrants discussion is the prominent weight attributed to the United States in the creation of the global education governance system. For historians of the Cold War—and beyond—the book's strong emphasis on U.S. influence may raise questions, as it aligns, to some extent, with a centre-periphery perspective that positions the U.S. as the primary driver of international organisations and educational agendas. This perspective resonates with theories of Pax Americana, which highlight the dominant role of U.S. geopolitical interests in shaping the agendas of UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank.

However, contemporary historical research increasingly moves beyond such narratives, emphasizing the complex interplay of multiple actors in shaping

international organisations. Interactions with other states, field-level experiences, and regional dynamics have also played crucial roles in co-constructing educational policies and governance structures. While the book primarily focuses on headquarters-level decision-making and shared conference spaces—providing valuable insights—it may not fully capture the diverse and decentralised processes that have influenced these organisations from the ground up. Further research that incorporates the agency of other actors and contextual dynamics could add greater depth to our understanding of how global education governance has evolved over time.

In conclusion, this book makes a well-researched and significant contribution to multiple scholarly fields, offering a multi-faceted perspective that appeals to a diverse audience, including historians, sociologists, and policy analysts. Its cross-disciplinary approach enhances the analytical depth of the study and provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which educational norms and practices have been shaped at both global and local levels. By bridging the history of international relations, education policy, and educational governance studies, the book positions itself as a benchmark study that will undoubtedly serve as an essential reference for scholars examining the evolving role of international organisations in shaping global education. Beyond its historical insights, the book presents valuable perspectives for political scientists, sociologists, and scholars of global studies, particularly those exploring the complex interplay between international organisations and national education systems. Furthermore, it is a highly relevant resource for contemporary educational researchers,

policy analysts, and practitioners who navigate the challenges of educational governance and transnational policy networks in their daily work.

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