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editorial: knowing, governing, and measuring: the epistemic power of international organisations

On Education

Issue 24 looks into the way international organisations have historically shaped and continue to shape knowledge systems and practices in educational settings all over the world. It explores how global players such as UNESCO or OECD have contributed, in different historical and political contexts, to the introduction, consolidation and perpetuation of Western knowledge systems and practices as well as the definition of what is deemed 'valuable knowledge' throughout the globe. We ask how specific practices, such as standardised educational evaluation, scientific expertise, 'modern' technological infrastructure, and global frameworks have promoted and continue to reproduce specific Western-centric epistemic regimes under the guise of universality, neutrality and progress—while simultaneously ignoring, suppressing or fetishising local knowledges and practices, especially in the Global South.

Keywords: education, epistemology, governance, international organisations, knowledge

In September 1965, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) convened the World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy in Teheran, Iran. UNESCO itself described the congress as an "historic turning-point" (UNESCO, 1977, p. 242) and "an important, even perhaps a decisive, stage in the progress of the struggle against illiteracy" (UNESCO, 1965, p. 1). Delegates from 88 countries unanimously adopted an action plan to eradicate illiteracy worldwide as a contribution to both human rights and economic development.

At the congress, the concept of functional literacy was introduced as the primary educational objective—especially for countries classified as underdeveloped. Functional literacy was defined as basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills needed for everyday communication, civic participation, and participation in the workforce of a modern society. Communities relying mainly on oral traditions were thus deemed ill-equipped for developmental transformation and knowledge acquisition (Goldstone, 1979; UNDP, 1976; UNESCO, 1965, 1977).

As a consequence, UNESCO, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), launched the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) in 1966—the first large-scale international program to combat illiteracy in countries of the Global South such as Ethiopia, Madagascar, Sudan, and Tanzania. Its stated aim was not initially the creation of "[a] fully literate world" (Jones, 1988, Chapter 4; UNDP, 1976, p. 9; UNESCO, 1977). The programme, which ran until 1973, tested methods of literacy implementation and investigated the link between adult literacy and economic development. It was, however, only one of countless attempts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by institutions, states, and organisations around the world to

promote literacy (see also Merry & van Melik, 2026).

Since the late 1940s, UNESCO had already made the eradication of illiteracy and the promotion of basic education central to its agenda. Its early concept of fundamental education, designed as an alternative to the colonial and authoritarian notion of "mass education," positioned literacy as a pillar of a broader humanistic project for formerly excluded groups (Boel, 2016; Castro Varela, 2020; UNESCO, 1947). Within this framework, books and access to libraries were considered indispensable tools for development; UNESCO's constitution even declared "the conservation and protection of the world's inheritance of books" as a core objective. Céline Giton has therefore described books as UNESCO's "[w]eapons of [m]ass [d]istribution" (Giton, 2016, p. 49; UNESCO, 1945, Art. 1).

This strategy was not unique to UNESCO. Other international organisations similarly employed education as an instrument of governance and intervention. From the 1960s onwards, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emerged as a central epistemic actor in education. The organisation pioneered the systematic economic valuation of education by translating it into the language of human capital. Education was reframed as an investment with measurable returns, a productive resource comparable to land, labour, and capital, thereby embedding schooling within the global growth paradigm. This marked a profound epistemic shift: education ceased to be primarily a cultural or civic good and became a quantifiable index for productivity and competitiveness (Bürgi, 2017; Leimgruber & Schmelzer, 2017; Rohstock, 2020; Schmelzer, 2016; Tröhler, 2013; Ydesen, 2019).

Since their creation in the aftermath of the Second World War, international organisations have played an increasingly important role in the global economic, political, and cultural arenas. These organisations—namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the OECD, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)—were established at different times and with distinct mandates, but all played a role in shaping and consolidating the Western liberal order in the postwar context and amid the ideological struggle between East and West. UNESCO, by contrast, was explicitly entrusted with an educational mission from the outset. However, several of these organisations quickly and substantially moved beyond their original fields of activity to devote considerable attention to education, since they deemed it to be a decisive factor for economic development (Laval & Weber, 2002; Lessard, 2021, p. 2).

This growing involvement in education was accompanied by the development of knowledge tools through which international organisations sought to influence national and local education policies. By subjecting local and national education policies to the imperatives of globalised economic development—conceived as the inescapable horizon of "post-national" societies to which they must adapt—they have contributed to the delocalisation and denationalisation of education systems (Laval & Weber, 2002; Lessard, 2021, p. 3). Besides literacy campaigns, these organisations have promoted and continue to promote their ways of knowing in a variety of fields, such as environmental education (Bentele & Rohstock, 2025; Sauvé et al., 2007) and education for peace (UNESCO, 1972), across all educational sectors and age groups—while promising development, increased productivity, and progress to countries classified as 'less developed' (e.g., Hof, 2024; Mateos & Suárez-Díaz, 2020).

Thus, education was used as a conduit for normative and strategic objectives—and for the promotion of specific knowledge practices and epistemologies, often presented as universally valid.

Education was cast as a key driver of economic development, social cohesion, security, health, and global competitiveness (Lingard & Sellar, 2016). Standardised educational evaluation, in turn, has served both as a governance (or regulation) tool for education systems and as a pedagogical instrument for improving individual student learning outcomes (Mons, 2009; Mons & Pons, 2006). The epistemologies underpinning these frameworks, however, have been deeply modernist, managerial, and Western-centric. They have defined what counts as valid and valuable knowledge, effective pedagogy, and meaningful learning in ways that marginalise other (local) knowledge traditions and epistemic practices, particularly in and from the Global South.

Educational research across various subdisciplines has been crucial in documenting and resisting these dynamics. Scholars such as Leon Tikly (2011) have argued for approaches to educational quality that move beyond universalist benchmarks to centre issues of relevance, language, and cultural justice. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) calls for epistemologies of the South and cognitive justice as a counter to what he terms the "epistemicide" enacted by global governance regimes. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a) likewise insists on epistemic freedom as a condition for decolonising education. Together, these perspectives highlight the extent to which international organisations have shaped the epistemologies of education not only through cooperation, but also through epistemic violence that silences alternative ways of knowing.

A substantial body of educational research has examined the influence of international organisations on education policies, institutions, and knowledge production across different educational sectors (Jones, 2007; Mundy et al., 2016; Ydesen, 2019). This includes studies of their role in higher education (Amaral & Neave, 2009; Molla, 2014), as well as critical scholarship on epistemic hierarchies and the decolonisation of education (Andreotti et al., 2015; Asea, 2022; Kermoal & Gareau, 2019; Mbembe, 2016; Mondain & Goudiaby, 2022; Vanthuyne & Dussault, 2022; Wilson, 2001). While the decolonisation of hegemonically Westernised higher education curricula can serve as a powerful catalyst for achieving educational, cultural, political, and socio-economic development goals (Kermoal & Gareau, 2019; Le Grange, 2016, p. 4; Mondain & Goudiaby, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018b, p. 18; Vanthuyne & Dussault, 2022), current knowledge paradigms in the academies of developing countries remain Western, and are, paradoxically, still largely considered the most desirable (Dousa & Ibekwe-SanJuan, 2014; Ibekwe-SanJuan & Durampart, 2018). Much of the present curriculum in universities largely reflects Western worldviews (Heleta, 2016; Tonda, 2012). This issue, among other goals, aims at creating a space to (re)imagine education as something that inspires reflection, critical engagement, action, and the capacity to become agents of change—particularly by exploring alternative perspectives alongside the canonical West (Mbembe, 2016, p. 33; Sauvé et al., 2007; Wilson, 2001) – without falling into the trap of tokenism.

During periods of Islamic as well as Western colonisation in Africa, certain religious organisations (Christian and Islamic) encouraged the communities to set up local schools based on dialects or on the Koran, which formed part of the region's indigenous education system (Paré-Kaboré, 2013; UNESCO, 1982). Despite opposition from administration authorities, these organisations encouraged people to take charge of their own education. Nowadays, in major urban centers in the Global South, traditional schools are emerging that enable certain urban communities and ethnic groups to benefit from an education inspired by their customs and ancestral values (Mungala, 1982; Yameogo, 2021).

Rather than treating international organisations as homogeneous actors or their epistemic authority as a given, this issue examines how such authority has been historically constructed, legitimised,

contested, and transformed. Bringing together different theoretical, historical, and decolonial perspectives, it explores the knowledge practices through which international organisations have shaped educational agendas, established particular understandings of education, and negotiated their authority across different political and institutional contexts.

Alexander W. Wiseman opens with an analysis of how scientization and standardisation produce epistemic authority. Maren Elfert explores the role of scientism in global educational governance, while Jenny Ozga asks whether growing inequalities and right-wing populism challenge the authority of international organisations as knowledge brokers. Joakim Landahl traces the historical negotiations behind the IEA's early civic education study. From a decolonial perspective, Ana Werkstetter Caravaca examines the epistemic hierarchies embedded in the OECD's comparative regime, while Leon Tikly explores their reproduction in the African Union's education strategy for 2026–2035. Iveta Silova and Sandra Nabulega investigate how international digital literacy agendas contribute to extractive economies and planetary defuturing. Christian Ydesen addresses the contested legitimacy of international organisations and alternative futures for global education. Finally, Walter Fritsch examines UNESCO's stakeholder consultations, showing how they can generate legitimacy for both the organisation and its participants.

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