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symbiotic legitimacy: how stakeholder consultations at UNESCO serve both the organisation and the participants

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This article examines how broad stakeholder consultations generate and sustain legitimacy in global education governance, focusing on UNESCO's 2019–2021 Futures of Education initiative. While large-scale participatory setups risk engaging stakeholders in a tokenistic fashion, the article argues that such consultations can provide legitimacy for all actors involved. Drawing on interviews with stakeholders, it contrasts UNESCO's official framing with participants' perspectives. The findings reveal a mutually beneficial arrangement where participants engage with UNESCO not necessarily to influence consultation outcomes, but to leverage the organization's global authority to legitimize and promote their own work locally. In turn, UNESCO draws on participants' diversity and reputation to reinforce its organizational identity and claims to inclusivity. The article conceptualizes this dynamic as symbiotic legitimation, sustained by an implicit covenant of mutual affirmation. Rather than challenging existing power hierarchies, these consultative spaces may thus ultimately reaffirm existing structures of authority and influence.

Keywords: education governance, Futures of Education, legitimacy, stakeholder consultations, UNESCO

Introduction

International organisations (IOs) were historically perceived as mere extensions of the political agendas of their member states (Keohane, 2011). As such, they were also primarily expected to answer to these states. However, IOs do not only have agendas of their own that are independent of member states (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999), but they are also increasingly expected to answer to a variety of constituencies and "individuals or social groups within or beyond nation states" (Dingwerth et al., 2019, p. 22). This is particularly the case for IOs that do not have any coercive power but rely on 'soft' governance mechanisms like agenda-setting and persuasion as legitimacy is particularly important for these IOs (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). In the area of education, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is one such organisation. UNESCO is mandated to monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education and has published a number of influential reports on education, chief among them the so-called *Faure report* (International Commission on the Development of Education, 1972) and the *Delors report* (International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, 1996).

In 2021, UNESCO published its latest "flagship" (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021, p. 165) publication on the future/s of education, the report *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (International Commission on the Futures of

Education, 2021). Over the course of two years, UNESCO supposedly consulted "one million people" (UNESCO, 2021) who helped to shape the ideas that made it into that report. These so-called stakeholder consultations are a common way to address legitimacy demands to include 'the people' and thus democratize global governance. They can, however, easily take a tokenistic turn if their purpose is mere showcasing rather than actually including different points of view (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Besides, from the participants' point of view, to have one's opinion make it into the final report is rather unlikely, particularly in consultations of such enormous scale.

This article therefore asks how broad and open stakeholder consultations generate and sustain legitimacy even when individual impact is likely to be minimal. This does not mean that stakeholders' input is meaningless. In "megaconsultations" (Sénit et al., 2017), individual input can function as part of an aggregated pool and indicate general trends, while some ideas might even make it into a final report more distinctively. The question does, however, point to functions beyond the deliberative aspect of consultations. I argue that stakeholder consultations are neither top-down tokenism nor direct grassroots policymaking, but rather a co-constructed strategic mechanism to generate legitimacy for all parties involved.

In the following, I first address the relevance of legitimacy in global education governance before applying the lens to the consultations UNESCO conducted for its report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). By contrasting UNESCO's framing of these consultations with participant interviews, I draw attention to the symbiotic relationship between UNESCO and its stakeholders in a context where all parties strive for legitimacy within their own environments.

IOs and Legitimacy

Unlike states, IOs in education governance generally lack coercive means. Their power can therefore be described as 'soft', since it comes in the shape of agenda-setting, persuasion and peer pressure (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; Robertson, 2022). Essential for such power is legitimacy, or other actors' perceptions that IOs are "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Actors in the same field as the IO will only follow an IO's suggestions if they think of it as the right entity to make such suggestions (Zürn, 2018). OECD recommendations based on PISA results, for example, might only become authoritative if the addressees believe in PISA's robustness and the survey's ability to measure education (Grek & Ydesen, 2021).

There are various ways to gain legitimacy for an organisation, for example through expertise, transparency or reference to normative frameworks. Since the 1990s, however, IOs increasingly face demands to open their decision-making procedures to input from non-expert actors (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Miller, 2007). Ignoring such calls for inclusivity might lead to decreased legitimacy perceptions, whereas the observance of the same can lead to greater legitimacy (Agné et al., 2015). Increased legitimacy, however, only follows if there is also a public element to such consultations, i.e., if the consultation is communicated to wider audiences. Further, legitimacy based on inclusivity can be distinguished by a process- or output-orientation, since demands for greater inclusivity typically concern either of the two (Dingwerth et al., 2019). While the procedural dimension looks at questions of whether decisions are made deliberatively and involve diverse constituencies, the output dimension looks at the quality of decisions, i.e., if they are just and fair (Dingwerth et al., 2019). In the following, I focus on the procedural dimension and look at the involvement of

different actors who are usually referred to as stakeholders.

Organisations and Stakeholder Consultations

For organisations, stakeholders are foremost objects to be managed (because of their potential veto power or beneficial insights) that can be placed in the organisations' environments. Following this logic, the identification and subsequent management of potential stakeholders in a given project is typically undertaken by the organisation. This management ideally happens through consultations and the stakeholders' involvement in deliberative spaces (Abraham, 2021).

Due to their legitimatory potential, however, consultations can become tokenistic if the convening organisation has no or little intention to substantially consider the input of their stakeholders but cannot (or does not want to) afford not to publicly consult these actors. Tokenism refers to the practice of performing the inclusion of individuals from minority groups superficially or symbolically to give the appearance of diversity, without granting them substantive influence (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Such potential for discrepancy between an organisation's expected and actual actions is widely acknowledged and concerns all kinds of organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Müller, 2013).

What is characteristic for global education governance, however, is that IOs walk a fine line between keeping their organisational identity and allowing for potentially disruptive input no matter how genuinely they want to include external ideas (Fritsch et al., 2024). Due to the crowdedness of the field IOs must maintain distinct and recognisable features that make them stand out from the rest and attractive to donors who want to push for a certain understanding of education associated with a particular IO (Burnett, 2019). This distinctiveness is also reinforced in the academic literature, which is why, for example, the World Bank and OECD are commonly associated with an understanding of education as a matter of human capital, whereas UNESCO is said to have a humanistic approach to education (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023) which also finds expression in UNESCO's hiring policy that strives for geographical representation. Unlike other IOs, UNESCO (in line with the UN Charter), is mandated to recruit staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible (Parizek, 2017). While geographical representation might diversify the pool of ideas among UNESCO staff, the consideration of organizational identity, however, makes it more complicated for IOs to sincerely include input from outside actors, making a degree of filtering or tokenism structurally likely.

Stakeholder Consultations at UNESCO

UNESCO's *Futures of Education* initiative that ran between 2019–2021 is an interesting case in this regard because it placed public, open and wide-ranging stakeholder consultations at the very heart of said initiative. While the initiative's final report *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021) was written by an "independent international commission" (UNESCO, n.d.), the report's ideas supposedly stemmed from the input of "one million people" (UNESCO, 2021) who participated in focus groups and webinars or submitted artworks and text-based contributions. This involved lay people as much as experts and policymakers. In other words, anyone could contribute to the initiative by submitting ideas on a website or giving their opinions through various online channels, since most of the consultations were conducted online due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

UNESCO's identity as an IO of "normative fit rather than efficient output" (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, p. 703) also featured in this initiative which repeatedly emphasised how education must be a "common good" (UNESCO, 2021) and "grounded in human rights" (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, the open nature of the consultations allowed people to contribute as they wished and without prior invitation requirements, potentially attracting certain actors while making the IO less interesting to others (Montana, 2021).

Such consultations are convenient ways for organisations to portray themselves by foregrounding certain ideas and affiliating with particular actors that fit the organisation's narrative. Which actors count as stakeholders is therefore much more a matter of narrative construction and performance than a matter of veto power (Holzscheiter & Pantzerhielm, 2025). In the case at hand, the sheer mass of input required UNESCO to make selections as to what content and actors to showcase. While anyone could submit their opinion or write a think piece, the IO filtered such input before publishing progress updates or advancing the initiative. Such wide-ranging consultations, however, also come with the convenience of ignoring all ideas that do not fit the narrative the IO wants to tell, which is more difficult in cases where the consultations are on a very specific program with selected (or even contracted) stakeholders over a longer period. In other words, broad and open consultations are particularly apt to strengthen an organisation's formal structure and identity.

To put this consultative setup into perspective, in the following I draw on interviews with stakeholders who participated in UNESCO's *Futures of Education* initiative. As part of my dissertation project (Fritsch, 2026) I spoke to 21 people that participated as stakeholders in UNESCO's consultations between 2020–2024. The interviewees were recruited based on the kind of input they provided to the initiative and their visibility as part of the initiative. They came from a range of professional backgrounds as well as diverse geographic locations.

Consultations and Ideational Input

For individuals participating as stakeholders in the *Futures of Education* initiative, the scale of consultation implied that their contributions would rarely be traceable in the final text. Indeed, the possibility of insignificance and tokenism were also acknowledged by participants. For example, one person who contributed to the initiative through various channels said, "I don't think UNESCO as an organisation is listening" (IN1), a sentiment that was echoed by other stakeholders, too.

Nonetheless, consultative formats are more common than ever (Gleckman, 2018) and participants hardly cease to participate. For IOs, participation is vital: if stakeholders were to boycott calls for participation in large numbers, it would create a severe legitimacy crisis (People's Resistance Forum, 2017). The self-identification of pretty much anyone as a stakeholder in education further simplifies the demands of inclusivity for an IO since the organisation does not by itself have to identify relevant actors that hold a stake in a given project but to a certain extent can simply rely on volunteers (Montana, 2021).

Participants, on the other hand, know about these structural dynamics but engage nonetheless because of the benefits that come with associating oneself with UNESCO. As one person would say about their own academic contribution as a UNESCO Chair: "What UNESCO offers is a kind of legitimising function, right? […] I start that paper saying this is this is a legitimate discourse because UNESCO is talking about [it]" (IN1). However, the legitimacy goes both ways as the same person elaborates later: "In some ways the [UNESCO] Chairs program allows UNESCO to be a bit

more free. I mean, like UNESCO can point to the work of the chair and say, 'Oh, look, they're doing all of these sorts of things!'" (IN1). In other words, stakeholders might acknowledge potential shortcomings in the consultation setup but engage nonetheless because they can draw upon UNESCO's authority to promote their work. UNESCO, simultaneously, leverages the potential prestige of its stakeholders to advance and legitimize its own ideas.

Consultations and Visibility

While this mutually beneficial relationship concerns the content produced by both UNESCO and its stakeholders, the same also holds true for the people that are showcased as 'proper' stakeholders. As one person would say: "The backing from UNESCO might seem like it's tokenistic, but it plays out much more than that." (IN2) The not so favourable position of only being a token also provides certain leverage for the tokenised as the same interviewee later explains: "A teacher could just use UNESCO and as a token of them, you know, suggesting that this provides them power or activism or advocacy" (IN2). By potentially tokenising UNESCO the teacher might level often-perceived hierarchies between local and global actors (Menzel, 2021) since the use of UNESCO's logo as a token can be seen as a form of emancipation. Arguably, tokenising an otherwise rather powerful actor is a fairly moderate form of emancipation, but it might nonetheless create a feeling of relevance and global connection in those teachers (and other actors) that use UNESCO's logo. This 'reversed' tokenism, where people use UNESCO's logo simply because it creates notions of legitimacy, is the reason the person contends that being tokenised is "more than that".

Stakeholders, thus, understand the nature of their involvement and engage not as passive participants but as compliant actors pursuing their own legitimacy. Their participation is therefore conscious and intentional, reflecting the fact that these consultation processes also align with their own objectives. They might "not [be] doing it for the institution" (IN1) but it helps to leverage their ideas in their own environment or to remind the IO of the existence of certain communities in an unspoken covenant of affiliating oneself with one another.

Consultations and Epistemic Power

What Cooke and Kothari (2001) once termed the "tyranny of participation" can therefore be reconceptualized as a symbiotic relationship. The IO retains its power to spread specific ideas of education globally more or less as it likes, while on the local level actors might leverage their own ideas with reference to UNESCO. Not surprisingly, the *Futures of Education* final report is very much in line with UNESCO's humanistic tradition. Thus, the framing of said report as an "invitation to think and imagine [rather] than a blueprint" (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021, p. 5) can be read along the same lines as the result of a mutually beneficial relationship and an affirmation to continue this relationship.

Of course, reasons for engaging in such consultations might vary widely and depend on many individual and contextual factors (Fritsch, 2026). Many stakeholders, however, do not engage because of their concern for education as such, their direct affectedness by the actions proposed by the IO, or their intrinsic desire to shape the IO's proposed future as might be commonly assumed reasons for joining consultations (Freeman, 1984). Rather, participants come with their own intentions and appropriate these consultations. This appropriation only works, however, as long as they stick to the script of holding a stake at the same time of pursuing their own agenda. It is thus a symbiotic setup where stakeholders do not necessarily have veto powers on the direction of a

project but rather on the ontological assumption of being stakeholders in the first place.

The common assumption that consultations democratize global governance therefore holds only insofar as the input does not threaten organizational identities (Fritsch et al., 2024). On the one hand, the establishment of a commission that was independent of member states as well as the openness of the consultations speak to UNESCO's approach to accommodate diversity and balance influence of state and non-state actors in international education governance (Meyer et al., 2017). On the other hand, the implementation of the consultations consolidated existing power hierarchies rather than redistribute influence, hereby falling short of normative expectations of democratic governance (Zürn, 2018).

For actors seeking to reshape the ideas promoted by international organisations such as UNESCO, these consultations do, thus, not appear to be the most suitable forum. If the very spaces intended to enable the participation of previously marginalised actors in decision-making, however, end up reaffirming rather than challenging the status quo, a legitimate question emerges as to where, if anywhere, international organisations can be contested epistemologically.

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