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Journal for Research and Debate

the struggle for legitimacy and the road to an attractive 2030 global education scenario

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This essay examines how international organisations (IOs) such as UNESCO, the OECD and the World Bank sustain their epistemic authority in a global education landscape marked by polycrisis and multipolarity. Treating IOs as neither innocent nor all-powerful, it argues that their legitimacy is produced through epistemic infrastructures of metrics, indicators and platforms, moral vocabularies of equity, well-being and human flourishing, and political alliances forged in multistakeholder arrangements. Drawing on recent scholarship on governance by numbers, the SDGs and the affective and technological turns in education policy, it shows how crisis has become a governing medium through which mandates are recalibrated and promissory visions renewed, often leaving technocratic structures intact. The essay then sketches three post-2030 trajectories, managerial consolidation, fragmented pluralism and deliberative regeneration, and argues that an attractive scenario requires a legitimacy settlement capable of organising plurality, disagreement and interdependence across local and global scales.

Keywords: epistemic infrastructures, global education governance, international organisations, legitimacy, polycrisis

Introduction: Epistemic Power Without Innocence

Debates about international organisations (IOs) and epistemic power often fall into two unsatisfying camps: either IOs are treated as largely neutral platforms for global coordination, or they are framed as little more than vehicles for Western hegemony. The current decolonial debate in comparative and global education studies is instructive precisely because it exposes the limitations of both positions. On the one hand, a substantial body of scholarship has demonstrated how IOs such as UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank have historically advanced modernist, economistic, and ostensibly universal frameworks that define what counts as valid knowledge, educational quality, and progress, often marginalising alternative epistemic traditions in the process (Edwards, 2025; Rappleye & Komatsu, 2021). On the other hand, critics have cautioned that decolonial critique risks reproducing reductive West–Rest binaries, epistemic purism, and a form of positional closure that weakens historical explanation and comparative analysis rather than strengthening it (Vickers, 2020). Takayama's (2025) recent call for an 'interdependent mode of academic engagement' speaks directly to this impasse. It is not a plea for consensus. It invites scholars to let criticism teach them, staying alert to epistemic domination while letting go of the urge to win arguments or to claim a pure position.

This essay builds on that sensibility by treating IOs as neither innocent nor all-powerful. Their epistemic authority is produced, stabilised, and contested in three ways. It rests on infrastructures

such as metrics, indicators, scenarios, and platforms. It is justified through moral vocabularies of equity, inclusion, well-being, flourishing, and attractive futures. And it is secured politically through partnerships, coalitions, and whole-of-society approaches such as the notion of an eco-system. Epistemic power rarely works through imposition alone. More often it works through gradual alignment, as actors across the field come to share the same underlying assumptions, policy instruments, and sources of legitimacy (Edwards, 2025). The belief that rising test scores translate into economic growth is a case in point. It travelled from economics into PISA and from there into national policy agendas, despite resting on weak empirical foundations (Rappleye & Komatsu, 2021). The key question for an attractive 2030 scenario is therefore not simply whether IOs promote 'Western-centric' regimes under the guise of universality, but how legitimacy is being rebuilt or eroded in a rapidly shifting global education landscape.

A Contested Landscape: Legitimacy, Multipolarity, and Infrastructural Governance

Global education governance today operates as a contested and multipolar field rather than a coherent or stable architecture. As Ebner and Ydesen (2025) argue, education IOs operate under conditions in which legitimacy has become a central fault line of governance. Cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and universalism have never formed a stable or fully compatible constellation; rather, they have long been navigated in tension and are today more explicitly recombined and strategically mobilised through policy instruments, indicators, and justificatory narratives. Authority is therefore increasingly conditional and situational, dependent on the ability of organisations to stabilise epistemic claims and moral vocabularies in a fragmented global order.

In this context, organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank are no longer uncontested centres of coordination but 'actors among actors' in a multipolar landscape. Their influence remains substantial, especially through metrics, comparative knowledge, and agenda-setting, but their claims to universality are increasingly challenged by alternative imaginations of the global. As Nurunnabi (2026) shows, this fragmentation is not merely discursive. It is institutionalised through concrete South–South cooperation frameworks, including BRICS education cooperation mechanisms such as the BRICS Network University, initiatives in technical and vocational education and training, and China-led cooperation centres for higher education and vocational training under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These developments signal a reconfiguration of global education governance, in which Western-led universalism no longer serves as the sole reference point, even as familiar logics of measurement, performance, and 'what works' continue to circulate across geopolitical divides.

This reconfiguration unfolds under conditions widely described as polycrisis, in which environmental breakdown, technological disruption, geopolitical fragmentation, and declining social trust interact and amplify one another (Tooze, 2022). One effect is a compression of temporal horizons. Policy discourse becomes saturated with urgency, from learning loss and digital disruption to future skills and resilience, while longer-term political imagination gives way to crisis management and risk mitigation.

In this setting, the classic formula of governing by numbers is itself changing. Authoritative numbers now exist in surplus, and the challenge for IOs is no longer to produce them but to stand out as trusted and credible brokers in an overcrowded evidence market. Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2024) capture this shift as governance by numbers 2.0, in which policy brokerage, understood as the selection, translation, and political reframing of evidence, becomes a central instrument of

global governance. Quantification, indicators, and visualisations still matter, but their power lies in aligning actors, defining problems, and stabilising policy reasoning in the absence of normative consensus. Hillmann et al. (2023) show that data visualisations do not merely represent educational realities but actively produce certainties, geographies, and digital imaginations that shape what becomes visible and governable. At the same time, Strietholt and Johansson (2023) point to enduring methodological challenges in international assessments, including sampling, measurement, and causality, that complicate strong policy claims. In a multipolar field these tensions become politically salient. Disagreements over values and futures are frequently displaced into technical disputes about methods, indicators, and evidence quality, allowing governance to proceed while normative conflict is deferred.

These dynamics are intertwined with a broader shift from traditional multilateralism toward multistakeholderism. Governance space is no longer confined to intergovernmental negotiation but is shared with philanthropic foundations, civil society organisations, and private firms, alongside knowledge brokers such as Pearson, McKinsey, and the Gates Foundation (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024). This expands capacity but also introduces new dependencies, competing knowledge claims, and commercial interests into decisions about public goods. Taken together, this proliferation produces a crowded and contested educational landscape in which legitimacy must be continuously attributed, performed, and stabilised in relation to others (Elfert & Ydesen, 2024). As Nurunnabi (2026, para. 3) puts it, "The question is no longer whether the traditional architecture can deliver – it demonstrably cannot. The urgent question is what will replace it."

Governing Through Crisis: Affect, Metrics, Technology, and the Renewal of Authority

Within this landscape, IOs have responded to the growing uncertainty less by rethinking the structural conditions shaping education than by reconfiguring how a crisis itself is governed. Crises are increasingly treated not as episodic disruptions that might open space for political reorientation but as enduring features of the contemporary world. This has important implications for responsibility. Across the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank discourse, education systems, and, crucially, learners are positioned as adaptive subjects who must continuously adjust to volatility, risk, and acceleration. The polycrisis thus functions not only as a problem to be managed but as a governing medium, through which mandates are recalibrated, interventions justified, and institutional relevance renewed (Bryan & Mochizuki, 2023).

One prominent expression of this shift is the expansion of affective and neuro-affective policy agendas. Social-emotional learning, resilience, well-being, mindfulness, and, more recently, 'human flourishing' circulate as moral expressions that promise orientation and meaning under conditions of instability. As critical work on the biological and affective turn in education policy shows, these expressions are not merely pedagogical innovations. They form part of a broader pattern of neuroliberal governance in which emotions, dispositions, and behavioural traits become objects of policy intervention and measurement (Zembylas, 2026), and in which crisis rhetoric itself opens education to private actors and commercial agendas (Bryan & Mochizuki, 2023). While such languages often respond to real experiences of insecurity and distress, they also perform legitimacy work, allowing IOs to reframe their missions in more humanistic terms while leaving intact technocratic infrastructures of governance based on metrics, indicators, and comparative evidence.

Crisis governance further tends to operate through simplification. Global targets, benchmarks, and

headline indicators render crisis communicable, fundable, and actionable but at the cost of narrowing educational purpose. In this sense, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not simply a policy agenda but an epistemic infrastructure through which future-making is organised. Bandola-Gill et al. (2022) show how SDG infrastructures attempt to reconcile technocratic and democratic logics by combining claims of objectivity and standardisation with commitments to participation and the priority to "leave no one behind" (p. 98). This reconciliation remains unstable and contested, and its instability is constitutive rather than accidental. Legitimacy is continuously produced through the tension between universalising metrics and appeals to diversity, inclusion, and contextual sensitivity.

The technological turn intensifies these dynamics by translating crisis into infrastructure. Educational technologies are increasingly framed as necessary conditions for equity, whether by supporting learners with disabilities, reaching marginalised populations, sustaining education during emergencies, or enabling learning in refugee contexts, while simultaneously being promoted as scalable solutions to systemic fragility. The central issue is not whether technology is beneficial or harmful in itself but that infrastructures are never neutral. Platforms encode epistemologies. They define what counts as learning, which forms of evidence become visible, what can be compared, and what can be monetised (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019). In crisis contexts this can turn emergency into a market-making device, as disruptions open governance space to private and philanthropic actors whose involvement introduces commercial logics into decisions about public goods, often under the banner of innovation, partnership, and evidence-based solutions (Bryan & Mochizuki, 2023).

Against this backdrop, recent OECD initiatives provide a particularly revealing illustration of how legitimacy is being recalibrated. The Learning Compass 2030 frames education as navigation under conditions of complexity, foregrounding student agency, responsibility, and well-being alongside knowledge and skills (OECD, 2019). The 'High Performing Systems for Tomorrow' initiative extends this orientation by advancing 'education for human flourishing' as a guiding vision for system redesign in an era of AI and rapid transformation (OECD, 2024). At one level, these initiatives respond to long-standing critiques of human capital theory, narrow performance metrics, and technocratic governance. At another level, they risk re-instrumentalisation. 'Flourishing' is translated into new competency frameworks, indicators, and assessment architectures that preserve comparability and policy traction (Kim, 2024). The language of purpose, ethics, and meaning thus coexists with, and may even renew, infrastructures of measurement and policy influence rather than fundamentally transforming them.

This dynamic can be understood in terms of promissory legitimacy. IOs increasingly derive legitimacy from their capacity to project compelling visions of educational futures and to renew those visions when earlier promises fail to deliver or generate unintended consequences (Elfert & Ydesen, 2024; Kim, 2024). Within this logic, flourishing functions as a promissory device that enables a repositioning from technocratic measurer to moral guide while remaining embedded within established epistemic and operational frameworks. The risk is that such visions operate primarily at the level of narrative renewal, leaving the underlying structures of governance largely unchanged.

Finally, the mobilisation of non-Western philosophies within the global policy discourse adds another layer of complexity to these dynamics. Ubuntu, for example, foregrounds relationality, shared humanity, and the socio-historical conditions of knowledge production, challenging the

assumption that education can be governed through decontextualised metrics and transferable models (Assié-Lumumba, 2017). Yet its incorporation into global frameworks also raises an appropriation problem. When Ubuntu or Buddhist and Confucian philosophies are invoked as moral resources within universal policy architectures, the critical question is whether such references open space for genuine epistemic pluralisation and locally situated concepts of education or whether they primarily moralise existing technocratic infrastructures, leaving underlying logics of optimisation and commensuration intact. The issue is not the legitimacy of drawing on diverse philosophical traditions but what happens when they are translated into competencies, indicators, and programme architectures. Do they interrupt the structures of governance, or are they absorbed as legitimacy supplements that stabilise them?

Beyond 2030: Legitimacy, Crisis, and the Futures of Education Governance

Crises are constitutive moments through which IOs are made, remade, or sometimes hollowed out. From the interwar period to postwar reconstruction, from the neoliberal turn to today's polycrisis, crises have repeatedly functioned as critical junctures in the governing structures of education (Elfert & Balakrishnan, 2025; Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). They are not neutral events but narratives and instruments through which IOs mobilise authority, recalibrate mandates, reorganise alliances, and perform legitimacy.

Across these crisis moments, education has often provided a key arena for efforts to renew governance. It is frequently invoked as a civilisational remedy, promising more schooling, more skills, and more reform, even as broader growth-oriented and individualising policy logics tend to persist. Over time, shifting configurations of knowledge, expertise, and measurement have shaped what counts as legitimate educational knowledge and intervention, ranging from moral and cultural framings to economic, statistical, and, more recently, data-intensive approaches. These developments suggest not a linear progression but a pattern in which new epistemic tools and vocabularies are added to, rather than replacing, earlier imaginaries of governance.

What distinguishes the present conjuncture is not a crisis as such but the simultaneity and entanglement of crises. Ecological, technological, geopolitical, and social disruptions now reinforce one another, while future-making itself has become an object of governance. Indicators, scenarios, platforms, and data infrastructures increasingly shape how educational futures are imagined and authorised. The post-2030 renewal of global education governance will therefore be determined less by aspirational declarations than by the epistemic infrastructures that organise participation, voice, and legitimacy.

This raises a central legitimacy problem. An attractive post-2030 scenario cannot be built on resilience alone. While resilience has become a dominant moral term, it often collapses into the moralisation of adaptation, shifting responsibility onto systems and subjects while leaving structural conditions intact. The deeper question is whether education governance can move from individualised coping toward collective responsibility and ethical orientation. This requires more than refining indicators or expanding affective vocabularies; it demands a reconsideration of what education is expected to do politically, socially, and epistemically in a fragmented global order.

Debates around SDG 4 highlight this tension. The issue is not whether global frameworks should exist but how they operate epistemically. When diversity is primarily filtered through standardised indicators, inclusion risks being acknowledged epistemically without being realised politically,

producing visibility without voice and recognition without redistribution (Ydesen & Elfert, 2023). A legitimate post-2030 agenda must therefore confront how universal frameworks can avoid becoming colonising in effect, even when universalist in intent. This is not a technical adjustment problem but a political and epistemic one.

From this vantage point, three trajectories can be discerned. One is a managerial consolidation, in which crisis continues to justify expanded control through metrics, platforms, and private infrastructures, with legitimacy secured through optimisation and risk management. A second is a fragmented pluralism, where competing regional and civilisational frameworks proliferate, challenging Western-led universalism without necessarily enabling epistemic reflexivity. A third, more demanding trajectory is a deliberative regeneration. Here, education is reclaimed as a cultural, moral, and ecological practice, and epistemic infrastructures are redesigned to organise disagreement, interdependence, and collective orientation rather than convergence alone. Such regeneration would also mean grounding deliberation in local communities, asking what people need and expect from education, what purposes it should serve in their lives, and how those purposes might align with, challenge, or enrich broader global agendas.

Whether deliberative regeneration can gain traction depends on treating legitimacy as a contingent and relational achievement rather than a technical outcome. This entails accepting uncertainty and risk in exchange for forms of authority that are politically and epistemically sustainable. It also entails treating local expectations of education as a source of legitimacy rather than as a problem of implementation. It requires epistemic humility, a recognition that legitimacy can neither be sustained by universal claims alone nor by moral vocabularies detached from structural change. It also demands attention to research itself as a contested terrain, fragmented across IOs, consultancies, universities, philanthropic networks, and corporate R&D units. Without such reflexivity, calls for evidence risk reinforcing the hierarchies they seek to overcome.

An attractive post-2030 scenario, then, is neither a return to an imagined golden age of multilateralism nor a single global consensus. It is a legitimacy settlement, a way of organising plurality, disagreement, and interdependence across local and global scales without defaulting to technocratic closure or geopolitical fragmentation. The future of education governance will hinge on whether crisis is treated as a pretext for optimisation or as a call to responsibility, ethical orientation, and collective imagination.

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Recommended Citation

Ydesen, C. (2026). The struggle for legitimacy and the road to an attractive 2030 global education scenario. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *9*(24).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2026.24.8

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