



# International organizations, educational development, and conflict: A (world) cultural perspective

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**Abstract** Many analyses of globalized education have directed growing attention to a problematic local-global nexus, with a particular focus on international organizations (IOs) as coercive and normative governance actors that influence national educational policy-making. By contrast, this work stresses the cultural-cognitive dimension of IOs' education work and their staff as highly rationalized, culturally bound educational theorists. This analysis of 26 documents from 16 IOs active in international education networks in the period 2000–2015 reveals a covert cultural conflict between IOs' universalistic goals of educational equality and progress and the practices of 'traditional culture' that IOs have observed in the field. IOs perceive such culture as impeding the former's educational development goals. Analysis further identifies IOs' decoupling of their formal commitment to cultural diversity and local context from their actual practice of standardizing policy prescriptions. Such decoupling reflects tensions inherent in contemporary world culture and provides a novel perspective on IOs' role in educational globalization.

**Keywords** International organizations · Cultural conflict · World culture · Comparative and international education

Conflict perspectives have been crucial in explaining national educational expansion and change. With the intensifying globalization of education in the more recent period, educational conflicts have become conceptualized beyond the nation-state. Researchers and policymakers now understand these conflicts as involving a growing number of international organizations (IOs), including intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), international

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nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), development banks, and bilateral development agencies. This article focuses on these IOs as new players, whose interest in education has received considerable momentum since the Education for All initiative in the early 1990s (Zapp and Dahmen 2017; Chabbott 2003).

Reviewing analyses of the various roles of IOs in shaping and changing national education systems (Part II), I find two conventional conflict diagnoses. One stresses IOs' "hard" governance and hegemonic imposition of policies and culture on nation-states through regulation, funding, and conditionality (e.g., Dale 2005; Klees 2012). Another perspective sees IOs as normative actors exerting "soft" governance. Here, IOs come into play as teachers of norms, agenda setters, and comparatists who bring the wider "metrological mood" (Power 2004) from other social sectors into the educational discourse (e.g., Jakobi 2009; Meyer and Benavot 2013).

While these approaches are useful in explaining processes that occur in the foreground of much institutional change in education, I propose an alternative view of educational conflict, one caused by more profound processes of cultural rationalization (Part III). In this perspective, IOs are understood as 'theorists' and 'rationalized others' that elaborate and diffuse integrated accounts of appropriate educational reform revolving around often inconsistent goals of equality and progress (Strang and Meyer 1993). Under this approach, institutional change in education is caused by a process of cultural construction and by the diffusion of authoritative models that originate in the increasingly scientized environment of individual, organizational, and nation-state actors (Meyer et al. 1997).

Such a perspective suggests different causes of conflict, which I term "cultural-cognitive". By this, I refer to the general epistemological and ideological underpinning of educational knowledge. Ideology, here, refers less to politico-ideological positions; it, rather, denotes a general interpretive scheme through which one evaluates social reality.

These cultural conflicts have received some attention at the micro level; for example, in research on identity politics and social movements (Koenig and Dierkes 2011). Only rarely, as in legal studies, do analyses direct attention to IOs as a particular conflict party (Otto 1997). Here, I extend these perspectives by investigating IOs as the source of cultural conflicts in education, stressing their role as worldwide culture-bound producers, managers, and transmitters of rationalized knowledge for educational development (Zapp 2017a, b).

To do so, I conducted a qualitative analysis of 26 documents from 16 diverse IOs involved in international education networks (e.g., Education for All, Global Partnership in Education) between 2000 and 2015 (Parts IV and V).

My findings help to better specify the role of these IOs in conflictive cultural rationalization; analyses of these findings reveal the cultural aspects in tense local-global encounters and the cultural boundedness of IOs whose staff embody postmaterial and (neo)liberal values. These analyses point to IOs' awkward entrenchment in the inconsistent goals of world culture: the formal celebration of cultural diversity, on the one hand, and the delegitimizing of such culture wherever it conflicts with the goals of equality and universalism, on the other hand. I argue that IOs are "decoupled"; i.e., their ceremonial commitments to culture and contextual adaption of reforms are disconnected from their actual practices of promoting progressive cultural ideology and universalistic planning based on the premises of the social sciences.

This work contributes three new aspects to comparative and international sociology and education scholarship. Through a direct focus on IOs, it provides a more actor-centric view of world culture, which is commonly conceptualized (and criticized) as a diffuse force (Anderson-Levitt 2012; Lechner and Boli 2005). It, secondly, contributes a cultural-cognitive perspective on conflict to the international sociology of education, which has

focused on hard and soft governance mechanisms—largely ignoring the role of culture-bound knowledge diffusion, notably through education. Finally, it lays bare an educational-conflict perspective in world culture theory that has thus far remained only implicit.

## Conventional approaches to conflict in globalized education

Scholars have frequently used conflict theories to explain educational expansion and change (e.g., Archer 1979; Bourdieu 1984; Collins 1979). While these accounts aptly address the issues facing contained national education systems, porous national borders mark the more recent, globalized period. Prominent concepts doing justice to variants of educational globalization include, for example, “pluri-scalar governance of education” (Dale 2005), “global organizational field of educational development” (Chabbott 2003), “educational multilateralism” (Mundy 2007), and “international education regime” (Pareira do Amaral 2010).

These macro approaches to global educational governance stress the growing importance of IOs in national education policymaking. In parallel, there is growing interest in the cross-national “movement” of educational ideas (e.g., Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow 2012). In these accounts, IOs operate as catalysts of diffusion and isomorphic national policymaking (e.g., Jakobi 2012; Zapp and Dahmen 2017). In general, as institutional change in education worldwide is occurring more quickly than ever, scholars have begun to pay particular attention to the (often tense) relationship between local-global or internal-external locales of analyses, with IOs often representing the global / external locale (Anderson-Levitt 2012). Scholars in the comparative sociology of education have given considerable attention to IOs’ role as external factors. Focusing on hard governance, research has long discussed neocolonialism, cultural imperialism, and dependency in the context of global economic inequality and development cooperation. In that framework, they often view IOs as instruments of forced modernization and neoliberal hegemony (Brock-Utne 2000; Deacon 2007). Similarly, early contributions from critical comparative education paid attention to asymmetric interstate and state-IO relations (Altbach and Kelly 1978; Carnoy 1974).

Interest in IOs as instruments of coercive diffusion of education policies has grown with their prominence in the more recent period. In the context of the European Union (EU), authors like N6voa and Dejong-Lambert (2003), Dale (2005), and Olssen (2006) interpret supranational education policymaking as a leveller and neoliberal variant of state reason and control in knowledge capitalism. In the same vein, the World Bank’s education policy is interpreted as the “handmaiden of the market” (Rivera 2009, p. 289) and new imperialism (Tikly 2004), imposing neoliberal policies on weak states (Bonal 2011; Klees 2012; Verger, Edwards, and Altinyelken 2014). Similar criticism can be found in the context of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Robertson, Bonal, and Dale 2002; Verger 2011). Even nongovernmental organizations, often seen as goodhearted workers on the ground supporting local communities, have come under attack (e.g., Rapple 2011).

With the “sociology of measurement in education policy” (Gorur 2014) taking shape, researchers have recently begun to direct attention toward normative mechanisms (Fenwick, Mangez, and Ozga 2014). Here, governance mechanisms include coordination and comparison (Martens and Niemann 2010), agenda setting (Jakobi 2009), and evaluation (Rivera 2009). The entire IO field is said to have entered an “age of measurement” (Biesta 2009; Meyer and Benavot 2013), with IOs “converging us softly” (Rutkowski 2007). In the context of the EU, Martens (2007) and Jakobi (2009), for instance, analyze the Open

Method of Coordination as a soft mechanism serving to surveil member states' compliance with European definitions of best practice. Similarly, Kalló (2006, p. 282) analyses the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) soft governance in terms of "strategic consulting, peer pressure, public studies and direct and indirect agenda-setting". Other studies investigate the biased generation and deployment of research-based knowledge (Dethier 2007), the far-reaching classification of educational systems around the world through educational indicators, and the use of quantitative methods as a technology of governance in general (Steiner-Khamisi 2009). These lines of explanation are important contributions in describing contested educational globalization and, if modified, can help to extend our understanding of the cognitive-cultural dimension of conflicts.

Obviously, the problem with focusing on coercive mechanisms is that we neglect other, softer mechanisms. However, even in soft-governance research, studies often ignore the fact that countries demand and pay for educational knowledge, assessment, and policy advice. Both approaches also leave little room for organizational change—depicting IOs as black boxes or mere instruments of powerful states. They largely overlook IOs' autonomy and legitimacy in the international community and, most importantly, the "lifeworld of IOs";—that is, the cultural underpinnings of their work (see Barnett and Finnemore 2004, for a review). This cultural dimension in IO work, the source and content of such culture, and the consequences of its diffusion, often conflict, are the focus of this paper. In the following section I argue that a focus on the cultural boundedness of IOs can complement conventional analyses of the local-global nexus

## Conflicts in world culture and the role of international organizations

Culture has gotten a bad name in most of the social sciences (Anderson-Levitt 2012; Finnemore 1996). Institutional theory, the main theoretical base of this article, has partly attempted to reclaim the analytical thrust of culture for the study of organizations and wider macro-sociological phenomena. At the core of these attempts is the argument that Western-style rationality is itself a contingent cultural construction. Culture is here to be seen as implying the institutional models of society itself. These models include "cultural theories, ideologies, and prescriptions about how society works or should work to attain collective purposes [...]" (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987, p. 2). Among these overarching collective purposes are (at least formally) justice or equality and progress. These goals are defined in individualistic terms as individual development (progress) and individual rights (equality) (Meyer et al. 1997).

Cultural rationalization—that is, "the structuring of everyday life within standardized impersonal rules that constitute social organization as a means to collective purpose" (Meyer et al. 1987, p. 29)—has led to the constitution and elaboration of models that define proper actorhood. These actors—individuals, organizations, and states,—are attributed ontological standing in modern world culture and are understood as the guarantors of collective purposes.

## The “culture” international organizations

In the institutional view, IOs operate as agents of these world-cultural goods, as “theorists” or “rationalized others”—a reference to Mead’s (1967) “generalized others”. IOs serve as funds of expectations and advice on how to act in any area of legal, economic, social and education life in modern world society (Meyer et al. 1997; Strang and Meyer 1993). IOs deal with such thorny issues as child labor, gender discrimination, gay and lesbian rights, climate change, and abortion (see Elliott 2007 for review); they construct, for example, the “whole child” (Schaub, Henck, and Baker 2017) and the “educationalized life course” (Zapp 2018). IOs are fierce promoters of the “schooled society” (Baker 2014). In these struggles, they stand for emblematic modern goals: individual agency, universalism, rational voluntaristic authority, rationalizing human progress, and world citizenship (Boli and Thomas 1997; Meyer et al. 1997).

An often neglected analytical thrust is that IOs derive much of their authority from the accumulation of rational and (presumably) impartial knowledge within their bodies; that is, their highly professionalized and scientific personnel (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Chabott 2003). Indeed, the few studies on the micro level of IOs—that is, their employees—support these arguments. IO staff are highly educated, cosmopolitan, and internationalist. IO employees are altruistic and intrinsically motivated; they score significantly higher than their national compatriots on such cross-cultural scales as benevolence, self-transcendence (Schwartz 1992), and postmaterialism (Inglehart 2008), with emphases on global citizenship, tolerance, human rights, equality, and altruism being highly correlated with each other (Anderfuhren-Biget et al. 2013). Importantly, IO employees believe in the general applicability of rationalized means to progressive ends. They score high on universalism, defined in cross-cultural research as the belief in ideas and practices to be applicable everywhere without major adaptation, and in the focus on formal rules as well as rational and professional arguments (Häfliger and Hug 2012; Luthans, Doh, and Hodgetts 2012).

Such a focus on the cultural codes within IOs helps explain the missions and agendas of IOs, inasmuch as they are seen as autonomous organizational actors.

## Conflict in world culture

While it is true that institutional theory privileges sameness over difference, with little causal value attributed to conflict in explaining institutional change, scholars from the fields of international and comparative education and sociology have largely ignored the fact that the *consequences* of the diffusion and institutionalization of rationalized models of actorhood often imply such tensions (Koenig and Dierkes 2011).

More precisely, institutional theory stresses a specific type of conflict igniting around “internal contradictions and inconsistencies in world-cultural models” (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 168). The most prominent contradictions are equality versus liberty, progress versus justice and equality, standardization versus diversity and individuality and efficiency versus individuality and equality. These contradictions can occur on different levels of world society—i.e., on the individual, organizational, or national level—with adherents of competing models accusing each other of corrupting world-cultural principles (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 172).

Conflicts about diversity and cultural self-determination, for example, are increasingly channeled through organized identity groups entitled to globally defined rights (Koenig

and Dierkes 2011). As one instance, organized indigenous groups are recognized as legitimate *actors* equipped with legitimate claims and supported by a growing number of IOs. Research on ethnic conflicts shows that these conflicts are not only fueled by the cultural distance of ethnic groups or economic inequality, but also by the presence of IOs that mobilize collective action to claim rights for ethnic minorities (Olzak 2006).

Cheng (2011) shows how the global and IO-promoted discourse on women's rights becomes a springboard for the articulation of "authentic" Korean womanhood. In education, identity-related conflicts may ignite over textbook content and language of instruction, as well as the role of religion, sexuality, and ethnicity in public education systems (McCarthy 1998). These identity conflicts can be found everywhere in modern multicultural societies, both facilitated by and in tension with liberalism (Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev 2005; Laden and Owen 2007).

At the same time, such categorical advocacy and inherent cultural relativism clash with the rights of the "quasi-sacred individual" and its human rights (Elliott 2007). On the one hand, legal studies document the predicaments of international law entangled with the universality, indivisibility, and interdependence of human rights and their relativity, historicity, Western legacy, and impracticality (Otto 1997). So far, IOs have decided to put a premium on the universality of norms in their fight against, for example, female circumcision, prostitution, infanticide, and illiteracy amongst pastoral nomads (Abu Sharkh 2002; Billet 2007; Dyer 2001; White 1999).

Broadly speaking, conflict is caused by the coexistence of different entities (individuals, groups, nations) and their entitlements (liberty, identity, equality). In many cases, however, the diffusion of abstract (and often unrealistic) models of progress and justice implies decoupling, which describes the disconnectedness of formal policies and structures from actual practice. Policy-practice decoupling, initially diagnosed in national education organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977), is caused by organizations' conformity to legitimate rules institutionalized in their environment—most prominently, the state, professional associations, other successful organizations, or, more recently, IOs. Formal commitment to human rights treaties, conventions against child labor, and female enrolment in higher education does not necessarily result in actual policies, even though violations against world-cultural principles overall decline (Abu Sharkh 2002; Bradley and Ramirez 1996; Cole 2005).

The conflicts described above imply the important role of IOs as catalysts of (contradictory) world-cultural goals and related reforms. Such a view complements other forms of conflict found in research on hard and soft governance as it looks at the cultural-cognitive mechanisms underpinning the technical reality found, for example, in the notoriously harsh conditionality of WB loans or the technical rationality of student assessments (see above).

A focus on these two properties of IOs—their commitment both to (broadly speaking) modern, liberal, or world-cultural goals and to the rationalized means to achieve these (i.e., socio-scientized planning)—opens new analytical avenues for conflict analyses. However, while these studies provide a welcome correction of the more rationalistic approaches in governance research, they do not come without flaws. Studies on identity politics and social movements, for example, sometimes paint a biased picture of IOs as fervent advocates of diversity. They rarely investigate the dilemmas and conflicts in which IOs themselves are trapped when dealing with such thorny issues. Moreover, studies usually investigate the effects of IO-induced identity struggles by focusing on the receiver; for instance, social movements and minority groups. Research gives less attention to IOs as the sender and producer of these "scripts". It is the task of this work to extend these perspectives by focusing on IO employees' views of these conflicts. It is of particular interest to understand how IOs deal with the built-in tensions of world-cultural goals. The next section introduces the methodology of the study.

## Methodology

### Sample and data

The sample of international organizations consists of those organizations actively involved in major educational initiatives. These include Education for All (EFA), the education partners in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) network, and the Global Campaign for Education (GCE). The Education for All movement started in the 1990s, yet was only formally adopted in the Dakar Framework in 2000. Led by UNESCO, EFA brings together a wide range of partners including government agencies and public-private partnerships as well as INGOs and IGOs (Chabbot 2003). EFA, led by a steering committee and working within the UNESCO structures, holds regular meetings and publishes its Global Monitoring (now Global Education Monitoring) Report (UNESCO 2016). By contrast, the MDG network is a loose consortium of mainly UN-affiliated agencies and regional commissions. It emerged from the Millennium Declaration in 2000 (UN 2016). Finally, the GCE, founded in 1999, brings together a dozen INGOs and scores of local NGOs from over 80 countries. Similar to EFA, GCE is organized as a member coalition; it holds regular meetings, is represented by a board, and publishes regular reports (GCE 2016).

In these three initiatives, we find most of the major regional and global organizations such as UNESCO, WB, UNICEF, ILO, OECD, the African Union, and the European Union, but also many INGOs such as Education International and ActionAid International. Also included in these networks are internationally oriented bilateral development agencies like Agence Française de Développement (AFD), USAID, and EuropeAid.

I acknowledge some typological blur, especially from a legal perspective, concerning international organizations. By common definition and usage, all these types (including bilateral agencies) are, however, seen as IOs (see the authoritative *Yearbook of International Organizations* published by the Union of International Associations, which has been active in the research field since 1907). They are international in scope, mission, operation, and, except for the bilateral agencies, in membership (UIA 2017).

Selecting major initiatives as a sampling strategy might reflect more substantial similarity in discourse than choosing a “randomized” IO population. However, such initiatives are key in diffusing major educational ideas, principles, standards, and their underlying culture as shown in global educational governance scholarship (Chabbot 2003; Zapp and Dahmen 2017). Investigating the content being diffused is the starting point of analysis.

The final sample of IOs is  $N=16$ , which was determined by the online availability of relevant documents. I sampled documents based on relevance criteria, and included those that explicitly referred to at least *three* of the analytical core categories of research (see below) to ensure that my analysis captured elaborated cultural “thinking” (as opposed to incidental reference). By cultural thinking, I broadly refer to purposive and systematic reflection on the role of culture in education.

I included in the sample so-called flagship publications and other official documents of high importance, which IOs make publicly available (e.g., UNESCO’s Global Monitoring Report, papers on strategy and policy, executive summaries), as well as more field-level project and evaluation reports. Documents, thus, reflect both official rhetoric and practical reflection from the ground. The final sample of documents is  $N=26$ .

The year 2000 is my starting point for document sampling as it marks both the maturing of the EFA initiative at Dakar and the beginning of heightened interest among

the IO community (Chabbot 2003). The search process ends with the World Education Forum in 2015, the most recent major educational conference.

Table 1 provides a description of the organizations and documents analysed.

## Analysis

In order to assure the deductive emergence of new categories, in my analysis I used very few theoretically derived overarching categories. These high-level categories relate to the concepts used in institutional theory and cross-cultural research introduced above, which include universalism and diversity, progress and justice. They also comprise references to conventional anthropological concepts of culture such as meaning systems, social organization, collective life, traditions, values, and languages (Anderson-Levitt 2012). I did not include these categories unless they were explicitly related to an educational context.

To further refine categories, I applied the qualitative content analysis tools of constant comparison (open, axial, selective), coding, memo writing, and integration of concepts and categories, supported by the software MAXQDA (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Whenever substantively necessary, I created new conceptual subcategories to capture the complexity of IOs' statements and to further integrate data across the 16 cases.

## Findings: the limits of cultural diversity and local adaptation

My analysis indicates a stark conflict inherent in IOs' work on educational reform around the world. The conflict describes the gap between, on the one hand, a formal commitment to cultural diversity and local context, and, on the other, the delegitimizing of "traditional" culture—based on a universalistic stance on equality and individual rights involving the promotion of codified global solutions. We now look at these findings in detail.

IOs explicitly state the value of diversity in their major declarations. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2000, p. 74), for example, recognizes that "traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right and a capacity to both define and promote development". In Article 20 of its Charter on Youth and Culture, the African Union (AU 2006, p. 15) declares that "states Parties shall take the following steps to promote and protect the morals and traditional values recognised by the community". The Pacific Island Forum (PIF 2009, p. 16) states that "the cultural values, identities, traditional knowledge and languages of Pacific peoples are recognised and protected". For the League of Arab States (LAS), the relatively novel concept of lifelong learning becomes "supported by values and beliefs regarding the importance of human development in our Arab Islamic heritage" (LAS 2008, p. 25).

There is a contrast, however, between these statements and the participating, or relevant, nations' concrete cultural traditions and practices. The "value and validity" that UNESCO (2000) gives to cultural heritage is put into question when that organization also states that "cultural attitudes and practices that promote early marriage, enforce seclusion of young girls or attach more value to boys' education can form a powerful set of barriers to gender parity" (UNESCO 2009, p. 105). The AU charter (AU 2006), quoted above, states that States Parties shall "eliminate all traditional practices that undermine the physical integrity and dignity of women". PIF (2007, p. 18) declares that "attitudinal change and values training is [*sic*] also important to help individuals



**Table 1** Organization and document sample

Organization	Abbrev.	Found.	Type	A.	
ActionAid International	AAI	1972	INGO	N	AAI (2011)
African Development Bank	AfDB	1964	Bank	S	AfDB (2007)
African Union	AU	2001	Regional IGO	S	AU (2006)
Department for International Development	DFID	1997	Agency	N	DFID (2011)
EuropeAid	EU Aid	1952	Agency	N	EuropeAid (2006, 2010a, b)
International Monetary Fund	IMF	1945	IGO	G	IMF (2009, 2012)
Islamic Development Bank	IsDB	1975	Bank	S	IsDB (2006)
Japan International Cooperation Agency	JICA	2003	Agency	N	JICA (2011)
League of Arab States	LAS	1945	Regional IGO	S	LAS (2008)
Organization of American States	OAS	1948	Regional IGO	M	OAS (2001, 2007)
Pacific Island Forum	PIF	1971	Regional IGO	S	PIF (2007, 2009)
United Nations Children's Fund	UNICEF	1946	IGO	G	UNICEF (2012)
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	UNESCO	1945	IGO	G	UNESCO (2000, 2007, 2009)
United States Agency for International Development	USAID	1961	Agency	N	USAID (2003)
Voluntary Service Overseas	VSO	1958	INGO	N	VSO (2016)
World Bank	WB	1945	IGO	G	World Bank (1999, 2003, 2013)

*Note:*

N IOs=16; N documents=26.

Types:

IGO = Intergovernmental organizations (N=4)

Regional IGO = Regional intergovernmental organizations (N=4)

Bank = Regional and financial intergovernmental organizations (N=2)

Agency = Bilateral internationally-oriented national organizations (N=4)

INGO = International nongovernmental organizations (N=2)

Areas:

N = North (N=6)

S = South (N=5)

G = Global (N=4)

M = Mixed (N=1)

to succeed in the harsh competitive globalised Pacific". In order to unlock the educational potential in the "Arab Islamic heritage", some traditions are to be jettisoned, as the Islamic Development Bank (IDB 2006, p. 41) states:

[C]ulture, tradition and narrow interpretations of religion is [*sic*] the primary impediment to the emancipation and empowerment of the Sisters. Until the relevant Member Countries and communities fully unlock the vast potential that is in half of their population, their human capital will remain seriously deficient.

As a response, the partnering League of Arab States (LAS 2008, p. 37) proposes to “adopt an ‘overall change’ approach, to follow a long term future oriented vision to achieve the social engineering needed to draw the picture of what society may be like in the future”.

In general, IOs always discuss culture in the context of *traditional* values and behavior and always in a critical way. In Ghana, the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2012, p. 15) sweepingly bemoans that

[t]he nation’s efforts and aspirations are also challenged by prevalent socio-cultural dynamics including public morality, attitudes, behaviours, conduct, responsiveness, time-consciousness, among others, that weaken our capacity to achieve our development goals. As a nation, there is the need to introduce and promote certain core values that will help shape people’s thinking, behaviour and conduct for national development.

Similarly, EuropeAid (2006, p. 18) mentions “cultural reasons: local beliefs, cultural practices and attitudes to gender roles” as key problems to be overcome to raise enrolment. These require “a mind-set transformation, certainly in traditional segments of society” (EuropeAid 2010a, p. 37). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID 2003, p. 5) can confirm this for South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of the Middle East, where “obstacles include male-based curricula, cultural prejudices regarding the value of educating girls, and resistance to coeducation, especially after puberty”. This is also noticed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA 2011, p. 7) for adult women in Indonesia, where “as the husband’s family pays a dowry to his wife’s family upon marriage, the husband tends to view his wife as purchased property”. In the same vein, the World Bank mentions that marriage practices with great age differences become “sugar daddy syndromes” and certain child-rearing practices are criticized for bringing up “nonassertive girls” (WB 2003, pp. 20–21).

In general, everything that is organized in private within the community—that is, informally—becomes problematic. For example, the World Bank and the African Development Bank often evoke the contrast between formal (modern and efficient) and informal (traditional and inefficient) education and training systems (AFDB 2007; WB 2013). UNESCO (2007, p. 121), in turn, critically assesses the care of young children organized with the help of female kin or friends and even “mother-centred child-rearing” as “informal arrangements”. Such informal arrangements are considered the root of most educational problems, such as low participation in pastoral areas (UNESCO 2009, p. 105). Similarly, the IMF states:

This problem [low participation in early childhood care and education] is more pronounced in the rural areas, where poverty is more acute and where the tradition of leaving children in the care of siblings or grandparents, or having children accompanying their mothers to the farms or other work places, still remains the dominant practice for early childhood care. (2009, p. 33)

Critiques of informality take on larger implications when communities are under attack for the value they attach to education, as JICA (2011, p. 28), referring to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), notes:

There is a custom in the Sucos to spending a lot of money for ceremonies such as weddings and funerals by inviting huge number of relatives and neighbours. And a relatively large amount of time and money is said to be spent on these ceremonies and festivals. ADB suggests that a change in attitude and mentality toward spending on education and children's health instead of such ceremonies is also required.

Against the backdrop of such delegitimization, the references to a curriculum paying heed to "local knowledge", "indigenous languages and knowledge systems", or "ethnoeducación" (see, for instance, AAI 2011; OAS 2001; VSO 2016) seem odd. What exactly the role of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum is remains unclear. Perhaps culture gets its place in the curriculum as "traditional handicraft" (EuropeAid 2010b, p. 7; ASEAN 2009, p. 88).

In parallel to the formal celebration of diversity and its actual rejection in project practice, IOs also sit awkwardly between doing justice to country-specific contexts and using standardized methods of planning and project work. Although convinced that "every context is different and will require a tailored response", the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2012, p. 51), for example, suggests only "two general ways to approach the transformation of the education sector". The World Bank (WB 1999, p. 31), in one of its few education-sector strategy papers, declares its "strengthened insistence that the particular circumstances of each country demand carefully tailored solutions". In the same document, the WB (1999, p. 31f) enumerates various early childhood education projects it has funded, with "specific objectives and program options tailored to the context of the client countries". For instance, "in Uganda, mass communication strategies are targeted to parents whereas in Nigeria, mass communications are targeted to young children, adapting the US *Sesame Street* model" (ibid.).

The Department for International Development (DFID 2011, p. 13) promotes skills development globally "tailored to the specific geographical, social, cultural and economic context of the relevant community and participants", while including the well-known world-cultural catalog of "gender, empowerment and reproductive health perspectives into course content and methodology" and a "learner-centred, participatory and flexible training methodology". With slight changes in wording, this project description could depict educational reform recommendations in any locale around the world and in most educational sectors (e.g., EuropeAid 2006; USAID 2003).

## Discussion and conclusion

Per my analysis, I have identified a diverse field of IGOs involved in the challenges of educational globalization. Surprisingly, I found little variance in the conflicts encountered and in IOs' reactions to these. IOs' age, geographic location, type, primary mission, or role in the international sector make little difference in how they perceive "culture" and plan educational reform. Although usually being conceptualized as the scriptwriters aiding the diffusion of policies across adopters, it seems that IOs are themselves highly culturally scripted actors displaying strong isomorphism (Meyer et al. 1997).

Language, religion, history—none of these aspects makes for a specific educational concept. On the contrary, when the League of Arab States (2008), for example, interprets the Koranic opening of "Iqra'" ("Read") as an imperative to engage in modern education and

lifelong learning, while getting rid of the “wrong” traditions from a “primordial” understanding of Islamic culture, cultural background loses its ontological purpose.

Culture has a peculiar place in IOs’ educational work; the concept becomes associated with “local”, “indigenous”, and “traditional” values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices. External observers equipped with culturally socialized and highly professionalized staff reevaluate and socio-scientifically codify such instances of human behavior. Family help and age difference in relationships become variants of “patronage”, “subsistence farming”, and “self-help”; the primary form of labor in most developing countries becomes “informal employment”, while raising kids at home becomes an “informal arrangement of mother-centred child-rearing” (UNESCO 2007, p. 121).

As unselfconscious victims of their own rationalized discourse, IOs decontextualize populations as made of purposive individual actors, disembedded from culture—that is, history, language, traditions, religion, nations and citizenship, tribe, clan, caste, community, family, sexuality, taste, etc. Their celebration of diversity (e.g., AU 2006, p. 15; LAS 2008, p. 25; UNESCO 2000, p. 74) defends only a cleansed understanding of culture, one devoid of practices opposed to the modern liberal panoply of progress and justice (Elliott 2007); and their celebration of country-specificities (e.g., DFID 2011, p. 13; UNICEF 2012, p. 51; WB 1999, p. 3) clashes with their practice of standardized analysis and reform design (Power 2004; Zapp 2017a).

The formal nature of professionalism and high rationality stressed by cross-cultural and world-culture research is evident throughout most documents (Luthans, Doh, and Hodgetts 2012; Smith, Dugan, and Trompenaars 1996). Despite the recurrent emphases on tailored solutions and diversity in cultures and classrooms, IOs propose various “education policy menus” (Heyneman 2005) made of a fixed set of policy recommendations implying a one-size-fits-all orthodoxy. Such generalization and homogenization of adopting populations and practices greatly enhances IOs’ ability to diffuse and reproduce educational reform by “exorcising” the local particularities, while still stressing how adjustable the concepts are to specific contexts (Strang and Meyer 1993).

These variants of cultural-rationalization conflicts point to IOs themselves as highly decoupled organizations supported by a stark difference between more “ceremonial” documents (e.g., AU, UNESCO, UNICEF, and WB World Reports and Declarations) and the daily work reflected in project reports (e.g., JICA 2011; IMF 2012). While usually identified for national organizations or nation-states, no one has discussed decoupling at the IO level. These tensions derive from a dilemma inherent in modern world culture. With diversity and cultural rights being formally celebrated, social reality breaches the ultimate code of individualistic human rights, causing IOs to be trapped in a brittle institutionalization of world culture. This is most visible in questions of gender equality (e.g., EuropeAid 2006; WB 2003). IOs’ seemingly a-cultural rationalization of populations and practices reveals that their formal celebration of (cultural) diversity is disconnected from their world culture-bound practice, a dilemma stressed by international legal studies (Dyer 2001; Otto 1997) but rarely acknowledged in international education scholarship.

Most lines of research stress the coercive or normative side of global educational governance (Dale 2005; Meyer and Benavot 2013; Tikly 2004), leaving little explanatory power to cultural factors operating in the background. When culture is taken seriously, IOs are treated as agents of cultural dependency and “recolonialization” (Brock-Utne 2000). Yet, beyond hard conditionality, normative agenda setting, and direct cultural imposition, we find much soft consulting, provision of knowledge, and diffusion of new logics of appropriateness (Zapp 2017a). IOs (and, by implication, their staffs) rest on a particular set of modern meaning systems and their work reflects those systems’ built-in goals, values,

and epistemology. Obviously, education reflects these cultural codes par excellence, as it is seen as the ultimate means to achieve individual and social progress in the “schooling society” (Baker 2014). Of course, one can call either all this “progress” or “the dismantling of traditions”. In both cases, directing attention to the cultural boundedness of IOs and the associated conflicts and dilemmas sheds a more balanced light on the work of IOs in globalizing education. They are themselves awkwardly entrenched in the modernizing project. Future research might benefit from including the attitudes, values, and norms that guide IOs’ behavior in order to explain some of the contradictions in the global educational agenda and its consequences for the not-yet-schooled societies.

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