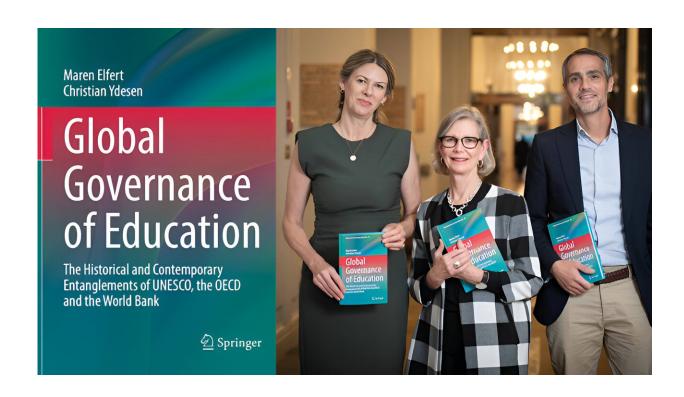# Global agendas such as SDGs serve to legitimize international organizations' existence, researcher argues

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From left to right: Dr Maren Elfert, Dr Susan Robertson and Dr Diego Santori, at the book launch event on 26 October 2023. Credit: King's College London

In a new ground-breaking book, a King's researcher argues that the global education agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as self-serving agendas for international organizations

(IOs) such as the World Bank, the OECD and UNESCO.

Global governance of education: The historical and contemporary entanglements of UNESCO, the OECD and the World Bank (published by Springer) sheds light on how the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have emerged as key actors of the global governance of education, leading to converging agendas and homogenized policymaking.

Dr. Maren Elfert, Senior Lecturer in International Education at King's College London, and Christian Ydesen, Professor in Education Research and Internationalization at Aalborg University, Denmark, argue that global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), serve IOs for self-preservation and expansionism. SDG4 for quality education for all, provides the framework for the OECD, which has built its legitimacy to a great extent on its Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), to expand its testing regime to low-income countries —under the umbrella of the UNESCO-coordinated SDG4 agenda and with the support of the World Bank.

PISA, which represents an internationally comparative test of 15-year old students' skills in reading, mathematics and science, that is being coordinated by OECD every three years in high-income countries, has been criticized for reducing education to what is measurable and standardizing what is considered as "good" education.

Through such programs, the IOs legitimize their existence by building up supposedly superior technical and bureaucratic expertise that is unquestioned and regarded as "common sense." And while countries and other non-state actors may well be involved in global governance bodies, it is the "experts" that take the lead. Universal technical solutions therefore potentially disempower countries as they are untransparent and

difficult to grasp.

"Education policies are commonly a reaction to universal agendas that often have little relevance for the educational needs of countries and undermine local knowledge. An example we cite in the book is when the OECD put pressure on Cambodia to participate in its PISA for Development survey, despite the reluctance of the Education Minister who would have much rather invested in the country's own national survey," says Dr. Maren Elfert, Senior Lecturer in International Education, School of Education, Communication & Society, King's College London.

Another key finding of the book is that UNESCO, the international organization that was created after World War II as the specialized agency of the United Nations for intellectual affairs including education, and is also the most democratically governed IO in which developing countries have the most say, has been crowded out by the OECD and the World Bank.

The weakening of UNESCO's authority in the global governance landscape is also due to the role of the United States that prioritized the OECD and the World Bank to pursue its national and geopolitical interests and secure its dominant position in the world.

The OECD, which was originally created to administer the Marshall Plan on behalf of the U.S. government, was used to spreading American management and business approaches aiming at greater economic productivity to European countries, while the World Bank was a chosen instrument of the U.S. government to expand the free-market capitalism to developing countries. Considered increasingly a difficult and unreliable partner, the United States lost interest in UNESCO, which furthered the rise of the OECD and the World Bank.

Through intensive archival research and interviews, the co-authors have traced the shifting power dynamics between the three organizations and how they have impacted educational policymaking at the global level. In the book, they shed light on how these three IOs have significantly contributed to the globalization of educational norms, policies and technologies.

"A must-read historical account of the intermingling, boundary setting and competition between the three big intergovernmental organizations (IOs) in education: OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank. Different from other scholars that document how these IOs have transformed themselves in response to external and internal changes, Elfert and Ydesen draw attention to the relational aspect: how have these three IOs navigated conflict, carved niches, and used and abused each other to amplify and expand their own mission?

"How have they done so in an environment that is crowded with intergovernmental and international organizations, each with a claim to govern education globally?" says Gita Steiner-Khamsi, professor of comparative and international education, Teachers College, Columbia University; UNESCO chair of comparative education policy of the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

  More information: Global Governance of Education: The Historical and Contemporary Entanglements of UNESCO, the OECD and the World Bank. link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-40411-5

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