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## Regional Intergovernmental Organizations in the Global South: Emerging Education Policy Nodes between the Global and the National

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**Abstract:** Regional Intergovernmental Organizations (RIGOs) play unclear roles in education policy making and transfer. Much comparative education scholarship on the topic focuses on exploring the interplay between global and local/national actors in education policy, overlooking regional dimensions. To deepen our understanding, we analyzed the strategic plans of four RIGOs in Africa, the Arab and Islamic worlds, and Southeast Asia. Qualitative policy analysis is employed to reveal the roles RIGOs aspire to play in educational development. Of the *what*, *how*, and *why* dimensions of policy, this study focuses on the last two, as they reveal the rationales the RIGOs provided to justify their organizational positioning, their strategies to contribute to education policy, and their mediations with the national and the global. Our analysis has showed that RIGOs position themselves as significant actors in educational development in their respective regions, playing

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several complementary and sometimes conflicting roles. Analysis via institutional theory of the interplay of national, regional, and global contexts has revealed organizational isomorphism, decoupling between policy and practice, expansive structuration, otherhood engagements, and scientization and rationalization of organizational work. The RIGOs view themselves as *elaborators* of global models and, simultaneously, *promoters* of regionalism. Implications for education policy and research are identified.

**Keywords:** educational development; educational regionalism; education policy analysis; regional intergovernmental organizations; strategic plan

### **Organizaciones intergubernamentales regionales en el Sur Global: Nodos emergentes de políticas educativas entre lo global y lo nacional**

**Resumen:** As Organizaciones Intergubernamentales Regionales (RIGOs) desempeñan funciones poco claras en la elaboración y transferencia de políticas educativas. Gran parte de la investigación sobre el tema se centra en la interacción entre los actores globales y locales o nacionales en la política educativa y pasa por alto las dimensiones regionales. Analizamos los planes estratégicos de cuatro RIGO en África, los mundos árabe e islámico y el sudeste asiático. Utilizando un análisis cualitativo de políticas, este estudio se enfoca en cómo y por qué las dimensiones de la política, y los fundamentos de las RIGO proporcionadas para justificar su posicionamiento organizacional, sus estrategias para contribuir a la política educativa y sus mediaciones con lo nacional y lo global. Nuestro análisis mostró que los RIGO se posicionan como actores importantes en el desarrollo educativo en sus respectivas regiones, desempeñando varios roles, a veces contradictorios. El análisis a través de la teoría institucional de la interacción de los contextos nacionales, regionales y globales reveló isomorfismo organizacional, desacoplamiento entre política y práctica, estructuración expansiva, compromisos de alteridad y científicización y racionalización del trabajo organizacional. Los RIGO se ven a sí mismos como elaboradores de modelos globales y, simultáneamente, promotores del regionalismo. Se identifican las implicaciones para la investigación y la política educativa.

**Palabras-clave:** desarrollo educativo; regionalismo educativo; análisis de políticas educativas; organizaciones intergubernamentales regionales; plan estratégico

### **Organizações intergovernamentais regionais no Sul Global: Nós de políticas educacionais emergentes entre o global e o nacional**

**Resumo:** Organizações Intergovernamentais Regionais (RIGOs) desempenham papéis pouco claros na formulação e transferência de políticas educacionais. Muitos estudos sobre o tema enfocam a interação entre atores globais e locais ou nacionais na política educacional e negligenciam as dimensões regionais. Analisamos os planos estratégicos de quatro RIGOs na África, nos mundos árabe e islâmico e no sudeste da Ásia. Usando a análise qualitativa de políticas, este estudo enfoca as dimensões de como e por que das políticas e os fundamentos que os RIGOs forneceram para justificar seu posicionamento organizacional, suas estratégias para contribuir com a política educacional e suas mediações com o nacional e o global. Nossa análise mostrou que os RIGOs se posicionam como atores significativos no desenvolvimento educacional em suas respectivas regiões, desempenhando vários papéis complementares e às vezes conflitantes. A análise por meio da teoria institucional da interação dos contextos nacionais, regionais e globais revelou isomorfismo organizacional, desacoplamento entre política e prática, estruturação expansiva, engajamentos de alteridade e científicização e racionalização do trabalho organizacional. Os RIGOs se veem como elaboradores de modelos globais e, simultaneamente, promotores do regionalismo. Implicações para políticas de educação e pesquisa são identificadas.

**Palavras-chave:** desenvolvimento educacional; regionalismo educacional; análise de políticas educacionais; organizações intergovernamentais regionais; plano estratégico

## **Regional Intergovernmental Organizations in the Global South: Emerging Education Policy Nodes between the Global and the National**

Regional Intergovernmental Organizations (RIGOs), organizations established by sovereign countries in specific international regions having common cultures (Cai, 2010; Dent, 2008), are “increasingly recognized as significant sites of the contested social politics of the governance of globalization and international integration” (Yeates & Riggiozzi, 2017, p. 3). Most RIGOs are established for economic, security, and environmental purposes whereas others have interests in education, technology, and scientific research (Erturk, 2015). In education, RIGOs are portrayed as important actors in the shaping of policies (Erturk, 2015; Olds & Robertson, 2011; Yeates & Riggiozzi, 2017) besides nation states and multilateral organizations, which are respectively designated in comparative education studies as the local/national, and the global (Bekele, 2018). RIGOs are thus considered intermediate arrangements between multilateralism and nationalism (Cai, 2010).

Studies on the roles of multilateral and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in education abound (e.g. Chabbott, 2003; Harber, 2014; Heyneman & Lee, 2016; Jacobi, 2012; Jones, 2004; Jones & Coleman, 2005; Kendall, 2009; King, 1991; Menashy & Shields, 2017; Moutsios, 2009; Mundy, 2006; Singh, 2011; Yoshida & van der Walt, 2018; Zapp, 2020). Emphasis has been on the roles of organizations such as the UNESCO, World Bank, and the OECD, their engagement modalities, and their impacts on education and development, often considering the ‘Global South’ as receiver of development aid. These and other studies considerably contributed to our understanding of global educational governance and how that affects education policy making and transfer, and educational development.

However, the roles RIGOs play in education policy are limited and unclear in many respects. As indicated above, much scholarship seems to focus on exploring the interplay between the global and the local/national in educational development (Bekele, 2018; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013), overlooking the *regional* dimension. Moreover, RIGOs having educational mandates have emerged only recently (Olds & Robertson, 2011; SDGs Steering Committee, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). The RIGO’s roles are interconnected by regional, ethnic and religious affinities, and geographic proximities. Through “an analysis of policy documents” (Zapp, 2020, p. 17), a “mapping of (their) strategies, targets and monitoring frameworks would be helpful” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 7) to better inform education policy making and transfer. Therefore, this study explores the roles RIGOs play in educational policymaking and transfer in Africa, the Arab and Islamic worlds, and Southeast Asia through an analysis of their strategic plans.

Because strategic plans constitute organizational visions and goals, strategic priorities, and implementation mechanisms (Addie, 2018; Allison & Kaye, 2011; Bekele & Ofoyuru, 2021; Pirtea et al., 2009), a methodical analysis of them could manifest the roles RIGOs aspire to play in educational development and their relationships with the local/national and global policy actors. As our focus is on exploring the aspirations of RIGOs within the context of the UN 2030 Agenda, we have analyzed their post-2015 strategic plans. Exploring the reasons that trigger the development of their strategic plans and analyzing their implementation strategies could further our understanding of educational regionalism. The following questions have guided the study: How do regional intergovernmental organizations justify the development of their educational strategic plans? How

do the organizations aspire to contribute to education policy and educational development in their respective regions?

## Views on Global Educational Governance

To create a context, this section briefly highlights *global educational governance* with a focus on policy relationships among the various actors. *Global governance* refers to the fact that “the global polity is an evolving set of processes and interactions ... that by definition involves heterogeneous private and public actors at... local, national, international, and transnational” levels (Mundy, 2007, p. 343). Research on global governance seems to generally follow three nonexclusive trajectories.

The first research trajectory seems consistent with the tenets of world systems theory (as in Wallerstein, 1974), that international organizations are portrayed as expressions of Western ideologies. Neoliberal and human capital thinking presumably drive “asymmetric and nondemocratic” relationships between the global and the local (Moutsios, 2009, p. 478); donors and international organizations (IOs) are “most likely to occupy central positions” whereas the local “occupy peripheral positions” in decision making (Menashy & Shields, 2017, p. 495); powerful countries dominate lower-income countries in setting policy agendas (Shahjahan, 2012); the developing world is considered as a mere recipient of Western educational aid (Mundy, 2006); multilateral organizations impose policies on nation states (Dale, 2007) using financial conditionalities (Jones, 2007); mass schooling and capitalist economy are considered as prototypes for emulation (Mundy, 1998); and the Education for All (EFA) regime was considered as an enactment of Western enlightenment ideas (Chabbott, 2003).

This research trajectory seems to portray how IOs and powerful countries dominate policy making and its global transfer. The stated power imbalance between the West and the Global South is considered characteristic of the traditional regulatory/financial governance model which treats the Global South as receiver of educational aid and policy.

The second trajectory seems consistent with the conceptions of world polity theory viewing world society as a cultural society (as in Meyer, 2010). Global educational governance is presumably founded on a shared conception of world society, humanity, development, and sustainability. This seems to represent the recent trajectory global educational governance seems to take. A longitudinal study of IOs (Mundy, 2006) indicates that “since 1995, some of the most dramatic shifts in the education-for development regime have come on the heels of renewed efforts to build consensus about priorities for international development” (p.29) and hence INGOs position themselves as policy activists and advocates. The tension between neoliberalism and social welfare (Mundy, 2006); the significance of organizational professionalism (Chabbott, 1998); and institutionalized norms for schooling worldwide (Wiseman et al., 2010) further consolidate the argument.

The third trajectory explains how global governance *primarily* uses the power of ideas or knowledge for organizational legitimacy and impact. This is considered a variant of soft governance (Niemann & Martens, 2018; Zapp, 2020), as it heavily relies on the authority of scientific knowledge as opposed to hard, financial preconditions to govern education worldwide. This most emerging trajectory seems generally consistent with the discourses of the knowledge society and economy.

However, our understanding of the global, regional, and national interplays in educational governance is still incomplete. Much of the scholarship focuses on examining the interplays between the global (represented by a few multilateral organizations such as the UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF, and the OECD) and the national, ignoring the roles the regional (RIGOs) could play in education policy. Studying RIGOs is significant as *regionalism* is generally founded on “a common sense of identity and ...a common objective of greater coherence” in socio-cultural, economic,

educational, and political spheres of influence (Cai, 2010, p. 1) and is part of the global educational governance. Further studies that examine the modalities other IOs use are warranted (Niemann, 2018; Zapp, 2020). A “more thorough reconceptualization of IOs as knowledge actors in global education governance is a task from which scholars of international organizations and comparative education might benefit in explaining educational change worldwide” (Zapp, 2020, p. 17). Through qualitative policy analysis of strategic plans, this study aspires to deepen our understanding of educational regionalism and how it contributes to education policy making and transfer.

## Methodology

### Approach and Researchers’ Positionality

We have found qualitative policy analysis of the interpretive type relevant for this study as it reveals, through an analysis of strategic plans, the roles RIGOs intend to play in education policy. Of the *what*, *how*, and *why* dimensions of policy (Cardno, 2018; Olssen et al., 2004; Wagenaar, 2007), this study focuses on the last two as they reveal the rationales the RIGOs provided to justify their organizational positioning, their strategies to contribute to educational development, and their mediations with national and global education policy actors.

Although strategic plans embody organizational best intentions (Addie, 2018; Allison & Kaye, 2011; Bekele & Ofoyuru, 2021; Pirtea et al., 2009), this study does not consider them as factual representations of objective reality. Rather, we consider *intertextuality*, that “documents do not construct systems or domains of documentary reality as individual, separate activities” (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004, p. 67). We understand that strategic plans indicate shared aspirations of educational stakeholders to meet their goals and might not necessarily equate with actual practice. Such global regimes as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are shared aspirations of nation states and IOs regarding education, development and sustainability. However, we do not subscribe neither to the conceptions of world polity theory nor to that of world society theory; we interpret the findings of our study using what appears to be the most authoritative theories.

Overall, this study explores the roles RIGOs play in education development in Africa, the Arab and Islamic states, and Southeast Asia as revealed in the post-2015 strategic plans of RIGOs. It relies on a systematic examination and interpretation of text, the strategic plans. Our philosophical assumptions align with interpretive policy analysis. Ontologically, shared understandings and conceptions are what matter in social studies including policy and strategic plan analyses. The strategic plans of RIGOs are not considered as factual representations or conceptions of objective reality as such; they rather reveal what is agreed upon by education stakeholders to meet a purpose. There is also a general understanding that such global regimes as EFA, Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), and the SDGs, which also affect and are affected by regional and national dynamics, are shared understandings or agreed upon aspirations of nation states and international organizations regarding education, development, and sustainability. The shared nature of the understandings, constructions or conceptions the strategic plans reveal discourage an abyss of subjectivity with regard to education development and research on it.

Epistemologically, based on shared rules and aspirations, knowledge about social reality is constructed with a prime purpose of understanding. Knowledge is thus considered as a body of shared interpretations and understandings which lack permanency or objectivity. A methodical, interpretive analysis of text- the strategic plans- can yield or reveal the shared conceptions of the RIGOs regarding education development.

Methodologically, policy or strategic plan text is systematically and methodically examined without imposing particular theoretical conceptions a priori. This reduces bias and allows for an enhanced interpretation of the findings using most compelling theoretical conceptions later on.

Ethically, this study puts the RIGOs at the center of the analysis and aspires to understand and interpret, from the point of view of their life worlds, their policy rationales, strategic pillars, implementation mechanisms, and their interplays with the global and the national. All interpretations take the perspectives of the RIGOs, and not that of the researchers', as it powerfully reveals their lived experiences regarding education development. The reasons and the strategies the RIGOs use to position themselves as important actors in education development are interpreted from their vantage points.

### **Criteria**

The following criteria were used for the selection and inclusion of RIGOs in our study. First, RIGOs should have *education* in their mandate. Second, as the focus of the study is on educational regionalism, RIGOs should be established by intergovernmental arrangements, and not by IOs. Third, to ensure regional representation, we have included a maximum of two RIGOs per region/continent. Fourth, for practical reasons only, we have included RIGOs that had their post-2015 strategic plans in English only. Although this may exclude organizations having their strategic plans in other languages, those in English support our analysis, as English is still the lingua franca of globalization and regionalism. Moreover, the conclusions of the study are valid only to the studied RIGOs. Fifth, the strategic plans of the RIGOs must be publicly accessible.

The RIGOs are identified based on the list of IOs developed by the Union on International Organizations and other sources. The African Union (AU); the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALECSO); Islamic States Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO); and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) satisfy our inclusion criteria.

To access their strategic plans, we visited the official websites of the RIGOs multiple times during the study period. To strengthen the analysis of strategic plans and capture the latest developments, we also reviewed RIGOs' official websites and other publications.

### **Analysis Techniques and Theory Role**

We have used qualitative content analysis in analyzing the selected strategic plans for the purposes of identifying the rationales and the strategies. We have preferred manifest analysis to latent analysis, as the analysis mainly "stays very close to the text, uses the words themselves, and describes the visible and obvious in the text" (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 10). It is not within the scope of this study to unravel possible latent or hidden meaning behind strategic plans. To minimize bias, description of evidence needs to be provided first without resorting to interpretation (Cardno, 2018; Olssen et al., 2004; Wagenaar, 2007). Considering the points of views of the RIGOs, we have first described their strategic plans without making interpretations.

Consequently, the study takes an inductive approach to the choice and the use of theory, where the goal is to develop a theoretical explanation of educational regionalism based on descriptions of the strategic plans of the RIGOs. This approach assumes that "theory is the outcome of research...the process of induction involves drawing generalizable inferences out of observations" (Bryman, 2012, p. 26). We have, therefore, used a posteriori theories and other literature that provide the best plausible explanations to the descriptions of strategic plans. This approach minimizes biases and ensures the direct emergence of theoretical explanations from the

evidence. Thus, analysis of the strategic plans in our study involves two distinct stages: description and interpretation.

For enriching interpretations and because the RIGOs are part of global educational governance, we have also considered the UN Education 2030 Agenda. We have used this and relevant theories as *interpretive models* to make sense of policy rationales and strategies. The interpretation takes into consideration how and to what extent the RIGOs mediate between global and national education policy actors in their attempt to contribute to educational development in their respective regions. The study, however, limits its conclusions to the studied RIGOs only.

## Descriptive Analysis of the Strategic Plans

### Contextualization

As explained above, the study takes an inductive approach to the choice and use of theory, where the goal is to develop a theoretical explanation of educational regionalism based on descriptions of the strategic plans. This section describes the rationales behind strategic planning and its implementation mechanisms at various levels. To create a meaningful context for understanding the findings, a brief account of the RIGOs focusing on their visions and strategic pillars is provided first.

The RIGOs member 120 countries across Africa, the Arab and Islamic worlds, and Southeast Asia, noting that ALECSO 22 member countries are also ISESCO members. As Table 1 indicates, the strategic plans of the AU, ALECSO, and ISESCO respectively cover five, nine, and eight years. The SEAMEO strategic plan covering the 2011-2020 period outlined its rationales, goals, objectives, and implementation strategies. The new SEAMEO plan covering the 2015-2035 period identified strategic pillars and implementation responsibilities, keeping the 2011-2020 rationales, goals and objectives unchanged. This study examines the two SEAMEO strategic plans as they are still valid and complementary to each other.

As Table 1 indicates, the RIGOs hold visions that appeal to global, regional, and national discourses and developments in education and society generally. They seem to have conceptions of education which are in line with emerging societal needs and global education commitments. Curricula are presumed to be more responsive to local/national, regional, and global realities. More innovative and participatory pedagogies that integrate digital technologies are promoted. Student learning outcomes are specified to include critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, analytical thinking, entrepreneurship, innovation, civic skills, technology skills, human values including tolerance, openness, and peaceful coexistence. These conceptions are presumed to improve the relevance and significance of education to socio-cultural and economic development in those regions.

The RIGOs identified strategic pillars for focus and impact, and for optimally using the limited resources available to educational development, see Table 1 below. Overall, they identified such strategic pillars and goals as access to education; education equity, quality, and relevance; and sub-sector alignment and harmonisation. The pillars are ubiquitous; they are enmeshed in the various goals, objectives, initiatives, and implementation strategies. The RIGOs also identified thematic areas in ways that mirror regional challenges and needs. The mechanisms identified to meet the strategic goals are varied across regions. The rationales RIGOs provided to justify the development of their strategic plans further reveal their overall organizational positioning to contribute to educational development.

**Table 1***Regional intergovernmental organisations and their educational aspirations*

Dimension	ALECSO	AU	ISESCO	SEAMEO
Foundation	1970	1963	1979	1965
Headquarters	Tunis	Addis Ababa	Rabat	Bangkok
No. of member countries	22	55	54	11
Vision	Promote intellectual unity in the Arab world	Build a prosperous and peaceful Africa	Coordinate joint Islamic action in education, culture and science	Enhance regional understanding and cooperation
Strategic plan period	2017-2022	2016-2025	2019-2027	2015-2035
Strategic pillars	Arab culture and language; Arab national security; illiteracy; media-education relationship; community engagement; organizational capacity building; and use of scientific research and technology	Political will; peaceful and secure environment; gender equity, equality and sensitivity; resource mobilization; institutional capacity building; harmonization of the different types of training; and conducive learning environments	Education for all; curricula, pedagogies and teacher training; higher education, research, and TVET responsiveness to development; inter-sector alignment; financing and privatization; and the role of media and civil society	Universal early childhood care and education; inclusion; resiliency; technical and vocational education and training; teacher education; harmonization in higher education and research; and 21st century curriculum

**Rationales and Purposes**

The RIGOs provide global and regional rationales to justify the development of their strategic plans. Global rationales appeal to how the organizations understand and aspire to respond to global socio-economic and political dynamics, education commitments, and overall competitiveness whereas regional rationales reflect the socio-cultural, economic, educational, and political realities specific to their regions. This classification of rationales is made based on explicit statements the strategic plans made. The rationales are consistent with the global, regional, and national-level indicators of educational development identified for the SDG4 (World Education Forum, 2015).

***Global Rationales***

All the RIGOs consider their strategic plans as methodical responses to the challenges posed by globalization, internationalization, technology and knowledge development, and global education commitments. They claim the strategic plans are developed to meet the SDGs by 2030. Specifically,



ALECSO (n.d.) aspires to help member countries to “catch up with the ever-accelerating global changes in education, culture and sciences” (p. 6). The AU (n.d.) considers its strategic plan as an instrument to “own” and adapt the SDGs and to enable Africa to become a major player in the knowledge economy (p. 5). To ISESCO, the strategic plan deals with the dangers of terrorism, extremism, and the spread of Islamophobia worldwide. The plan is also considered vital to enable Muslims to be active international players and producers of knowledge, with a final goal of enabling the region to play a leading role in building human civilization and spreading peace to humankind. The SEAMEO (2013) considers its strategic plan as a viable response to “the increasing pace of development and the ever-changing regional and global trends” (p.10).

### ***Regional Rationales***

Common to all the RIGOs is that they meticulously elaborate on the challenges their education systems are facing including irrelevant and low-quality curricula, poor teacher training, inequality in education provision, limited pre-school education, low achievement in scientific subjects, low secondary education output, poor technical and vocational education, poor quality higher education, low scientific research productivity, and lack of intra-sector alignment. The RIGOs also aspire to reflect in their strategic plans regional perspectives and realities.

SEAMEO (2013) considers its strategy as an instrument to identify strategic priorities; respond to the ever-changing regional trends; enhance regional integration; promote sustainable human development; and improve the quality of life in member countries. The plan articulates SEAMEO’s aspiration “to enhance the quality of life through the establishment of networks and partnerships, the provision of fora among policy makers and experts, and the promotion of sustainable human resource development” (SEAMEO, 2013, p. 3).

The ISESCO strategic plan presumed to cater for emerging member needs, provide education considering “deep-rooted authenticity and enlightened modernity”, deal with increasing sectarian tensions and conflicts in the region, contribute to education development in line with new approaches and expectations, and build peaceful and knowledge-based societies (ISESCO, 2017, p.12). The plan also “seeks to ensure the transition of Muslims ... to being active international role players, developers and producers of knowledge in such a way as to allow the Islamic world to regain its leading role in building human civilization and spreading good and peace among humankind” (p.7).

The AU sets its strategic plan within the general framework of Pan-Africanism and its centennial vision. It aims to set up a qualitative system of education and training, deliver human capital to realize its 2063 vision, build the capacities of the ministries of education in formulating policies and plans, and create citizens who will be change agents. The plan needs “to bring coherence and integration in the development of the various sub-sectors... that addresses the needs of imparting knowledge, skills and values required for systemic response to the socio-economic demands for development in the 21st Century” (AU, n.d. p. 13).

Using its strategic plan, the ALECSO aspires to overcome member countries’ intellectual, educational, socio-cultural, economic, and scientific challenges; technological and information gaps; and challenges of values, identity and citizenship. The aim is “to build a human individual capable of keeping up with his time, and equipped with the knowledge, skills and values that enable him to achieve self-realization and to actively contribute to the development of his society and country” (ALECSO, n.d., p. 6). The mechanisms the RIGOs use to contribute to education policy making and transfer are varied and prolific.

## Implementation Mechanisms

The RIGOs have neither their own territorial jurisdictions nor legally binding agreements with their members. How do they then aspire to implement their strategic plans? This section examines the mechanisms RIGOs use for contributing to educational policy making and transfer and then to educational development.

Noticeable commonalities and differences are observed. All the organisations rely on ‘soft power’ for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation but the particular mechanisms are slightly different across the regions. ALECSO identified strategies deemed relevant for implementation at international, regional, and national levels whereas the AU identified strategies at the continental, regional (Southern, Northern, Eastern, Western, and Central Africa), and national levels. The ISESCO identifies primarily regional and national-level mechanisms whereas the SEAMEO articulates strategies relevant for implementation at the regional/Secretariat and national/center levels.

### *Regional Strategies*

The SEAMEO Secretariat coordinates overall implementation by member countries; monitors and evaluates the strategic plan itself; networks with regional and international organizations for support; and compiles overall progress reports. The ISESCO has also elaborated and multifaceted mechanisms. One, a general conference involving all the ministers of education of member countries is required every two years. The conferences aim to “provide the ministers with an opportunity to submit their national reports on progress made..., adopt the reference documents prepared by ISESCO, discuss the key educational issues featuring on the conference agenda, and adopt its rules of procedure” (ISESCO, 2017, p. 87). Two, a consultative council is formed to “secure the successful international expertise in the priority areas identified by the strategy” (ISESCO, 2017, p. 88). Three, education diplomacy is identified to “boost exchange of students and expertise through transborder training, develop education policies, encourage innovation in education and work for increasing the adherence of countries to the UN plans on education and development” (ISESCO, 2017, p. 88).

The AU also identified diversified engagement mechanisms at various levels. At the continental level, the Specialized Technical Committee of Education, Science, and Technology functions as the ‘intellectual arm’ of the Union in successfully implementing the continental education strategy. The technical committee of 10 heads of state and government is tasked to mobilize the public and private sectors in the continent for the development of education. The technical committee is “responsible for implementing, monitoring, evaluating and drafting the continental education strategy report” (AU, n.d., p. 28). Collaborations and partnerships with the Association of African Universities and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) are also identified as relevant mechanisms. Statutory meetings of education ministers of Southern, Northern, Eastern, Western, and Central Africa are also identified. These meetings presumably help exchange of experiences, disseminate lessons learned through existing thematic working groups and educational entities, and promote cooperation. The contributions of the economic communities established in the regions are also considered vital for successful implementation.

The ALECSO also seems to have identified varied mechanisms for implementation. ALECSO General Conference meeting is held every two years and its Executive Council meets at least three times a year. The Secretariat of the Executive Council and the Director General oversees overall operations. Its departments and centers specialize in implementing certain priority areas identified in the strategic plan. ALECSO’s Observatory is tasked with monitoring education in the

Arab world, developing databases, conducting specialized studies and research, developing education indicators, and coordination meetings. The Program Council oversees overall implementation and reports to the Director General of the organization.

### ***National Strategies***

The organizations seem to have dedicated mechanisms for implementation at the national level. The 21 SEAMEO centers dispersed in member countries lead local implementation, mobilize resources for implementation, monitor and evaluate implementation, and report progress to the Secretariat. The centers are used as “mechanism to implement the seven priority areas at the national, regional level and beyond, and synergizing with ASEAN- the Association of Southeast Asian Nations” (SEAMEO, 2016, p. 2).

ISESCO national councils located in each member country are tasked with “monitoring school curricula, assessing results and proposing the necessary adjustments where appropriate” (ISESCO, 2017, p. 84). Members of the national council include representatives of the competent ministry, relevant government departments, religious and media institutions, the private sector, civil society organizations, teacher unions, university faculty clubs, youth centers, student unions, and parent associations. Varied communication strategies including websites are considered for publicizing the strategic plan. In each member country, a national fund is tasked to “provide additional financial resources” (ISESCO, 2017, pp. 84-85). Members also have expert networks “to provide affordable channels for the exchange of experiences and expertise... and evaluate relevant educational achievements” (pp. 85-86).

The AU considers the ministries of education own, adapt, and implement the strategic plan. They are responsible for “ensuring the ownership, domestication and implementation...are responsible for the collection, management, analysis and dissemination of CESA widely” (AU, n.d., p. 28). Multi-level partnerships are also identified. Engaging and deploying existing regional and continental networks “must support the CESA through the implementation of specific program interventions” (AU, n.d., p. 33). Diversification and increasing of funding sources “owing to new partnerships, south-south cooperation, private investments, foreign direct investments, diaspora, foundations and other champions” are identified as crucial (p. 33). Drawing on relevant theories and other literature, the major findings of the study are interpreted and discussed below.

## **Interpretation and Discussion**

The RIGOs aspire to contribute to education policy geared toward improving the quality and relevance of education in their member countries, by then contributing to meet the SDGs. Besides their expanded organizational structures, RIGOs firmly maintain that meeting education goals requires contributions from national ministries of education; the private sector and civil society; and national, regional, and international organizations. They could thus be considered as contributors to or promoters of global educational governance. As elaborated below, ‘soft power’ (Niemann & Martens, 2018; Zapp, 2020) appears to be their modus operandi to transfer their education policy ideas to their members.

These findings seem to generally corroborate the research trajectory on IOs that reflect the logics of world polity theory and scientific multilateralism. In our analysis, we have not observed traces of discourses associated with world systems thinking as asymmetric and nondemocratic relationships between the global and the regional/local (Moutsios, 2009); domination by powerful countries in setting policy agendas (Shahjahan, 2012); and imposition of policies by multilateral organizations (Dale, 2007). However, the explicit absence of such indications in the strategic plans

does not necessarily imply their actual absence, as it is unlikely that organizations explicitly acknowledge the presence of domination, supremacy, and or exploitation which could be revealed through discourse analysis. Our analysis shows that RIGOs subscribe to the conception of world society as a cultural society having shared values and ambitions for education and development.

Sociological institutional theories of the phenomenological version (Meyer, 2009, 2010), henceforth called institutional theories, seem to offer compelling explanations for the emergence and overall functioning of the RIGOs and their roles in educational development within their respective regions. These theories become prominent in contemporary world society as “social control efforts in an interdependent but stateless world work to expand theories and ideologies about the powers and responsibilities of actors” (Meyer, 2010, p. 2).

Institutional theories depict the world as a shared cultural conception of society which *voluntarily* affects individuals, nation states, and organizations (Meyer, 2009). Such elements of world society include multilateral organizations (the UN and its specialized agencies); nation states (institutionalization of world models); associations, organizations, and social movements; and sciences and the professions (Meyer et al., 1997) hold shared understandings of education, development, and society. The ‘stateless’ nature of world society begs for and legitimizes the formation of expanded actorhoods (Meyer, 2010; Meyer et al., 1997).

We deduce that the properties of nation states were presumed to be the properties of the RIGOs. First, such world models as the SDGs directly affect the structures of organizations and nation states (Meyer, 2009, 2010). The global education commitments underpin and partly justify the strategic positioning of the RIGOs, which designate themselves as intermediate arrangements or policy nodes between the global and the national. Second, that RIGOs are established and governed by nation states means that the former would inherit properties of the latter, making the RIGOs as ‘extensions’ of nation states. Third, the strategic plans of the RIGOs make explicit allegiance to global education regimes, the SDGs. Consequently, such concepts of institutional theory as isomorphism, decoupling, expansive structuration, otherhood, and scientization and rationalization (Meyer, 2010; Meyer et al., 1997) satisfactorily explain how the RIGOs aspire to contribute to the development and transfer of education policy in their respective regions. Within the context of the Education 2030 Agenda, institutional theory explains emerging engagements among global, regional, and national actorhoods in educational policy development and transfer.

### **Isomorphism**

Due to the voluntary influence of and subscription to global models, RIGOs appear similar in their internal structures and arrangements. First, the organizations presumably hold shared understandings of humanity, education, development, society, and sustainability. They view that individuals, communities, organizations, associations, and nation states have the right and capacities to ensure equitable development and sustainability. RIGOs’ aspirations to contribute to educational development seem to be built on and is justified by this worldview.

Second, RIGOs’ self-definitions of their roles indicate a strong positioning for harmonization of such discourses as globalization, knowledge society and economy, digital technologies, 21st century skills, climate change and the environment, education for development, and sustainability. These discourses are also used by the global to affect the national (Robertson, 2012).

Third, RIGOs aspire to support their member countries to meet the SDGs through the coordination of national, regional, and global efforts. This is consistent with the expectation that regional education strategies should align with the SDG4 and “provide regional perspectives for how SDG 4 targets will be achieved” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 7). The AU, for instance, aspires to

“own” and adapt the SDGs whereas ALECSO engages in “informed interaction with world cultures”. It then follows that RIGOs seem to be highly committed to advancing global education agendas by linking these agendas to regional and local education development. It is, therefore, natural to also observe that, in part due to the efforts of RIGOs, global education discourses shape local and/or regional educational development priorities at varying levels.

These manifestations of isomorphism could be considered as mechanisms of the institutionalization of world models- the SDGs. Of such mechanisms of isomorphism as coercive, normative, and mimetic (Karlsson, 2008), the last two appear relevant in the case of RIGOs, as the RIGOs consider their commitment to educational development as something good and desirable (normative) while at times they are inspired and positively influenced by other organizations having education mandates (mimetic). They do not seem to be guided by binding laws, rules, and sanctions (coercive), as the world society is viewed as stateless. The normative and mimetic mechanisms appear to ensure RIGOs’ legitimacy and external validity as organizations having education mandates. It could thus be concluded that RIGOs position themselves as promoters or elaborators of global (education) regimes.

The isomorphic nature of RIGOs could be linked to some concepts of education policy making and transfer. The traditional notions of policy borrowing (Dale, 1999) and policy reception (Steiner-Khamsy, 2014) seem to generally corroborate with organizational isomorphism of the normative and memetic type. Global models are also models of nation states and organizations (Meyer, 2009), on account of shared worldviews on society and development and the place of education in it. This could partly justify why ministries of education have been borrowing policy ideas from presumably better or more ‘successful’ systems. However, isomorphism does not necessarily imply homogenization of organizational structure and functioning (Dale, 1999; Wiseman et al., 2014). The RIGOs still feature qualitatively different forms of operation indicative of regional idiosyncrasies.

## **Decoupling**

Institutional theory posits that there exists a “disjunction between preferred actor identities and the practical activities” (Meyer, 2010, p. 13). The SDGs are elaborated beyond the socio-economic, cultural, and governance capacities and readiness of nation states and organizations. The disconnect between global regimes and national realities, and between RIGOs’ ambitious strategic plans and practices manifest in varied ways.

First, RIGOs view themselves as *elaborators* of global models, positioning themselves as policy nodes linking the global and the national. Their strategic plans meticulously detail how the EFA momentum fails to enroll all children to school, produces significant dropouts, exacerbates inequalities in some contexts, and results in poor learning. As Caruso (2008) argued, “all of these are certainly not expected outcomes of educational institutions” (p. 835). However, this disjunction between intentions and practices does not ‘check’ the global and regional momentum; it rather is used as a justification for more pledges and intentions- the SDGs.

Second, RIGOs position themselves as promoters of regionalism as well. Regional integration (e.g., of the Arab world for ALECSO, of Muslims for ISESCO, and Pan-Africanism for the AU) appears at the core of RIGOs’ foundation. They aspire to further develop regional identity and culture, as that is presumably considered vital for staying relevant and competitive at the regional and global levels. Each RIGO passionately elaborates and promotes its own regional cultures and identities, sometimes to the extent of setting a tone of competition with the global models. The rationales provided behind the articulations of the strategic plans partly reveal tensions and challenges in elaborating and enacting global and regional/local models.

Overall, the decoupling between the global and regional models can underscore RIGOs member countries' willingness for "in-depth national commitment and engagement" coupled with their desire to "reach consensus on purpose and policy priorities" within their own regional contexts (UNESCO, 2017, p. 1). The elaboration and promotion of regional realities concurs with concepts of policy learning (Dale, 1999) and policy translation (Steiner-Khamsy, 2014). Instead of direct adoption and borrowing of global regimes, the RIGOs also aspire to interpret them using regional and national perspectives. To better justify their existence as education organizations, the RIGOs appear to own and embrace global models while foregrounding regional perspectives and dynamics. The modalities RIGOs use to undertone the perceived tensions and to implement their strategic plans seem however varied.

### **Expansive Structuration**

Institutional theory maintains that "in an expansive world, the actorhood of individuals, organizations, and national states continually grows" (Meyer, 2010, p. 11). The stateless nature of world society mainly explains the proliferation of actor structures and arrangements at various levels. The disjunction between policies and practices also justifies the establishment of additional structures.

The RIGOs identified varied organizational structures to bridge gaps between their ambitions and practices in member countries. The ALECSO identified international, regional, and national-level strategies whereas the AU identified strategies at the continental, regional (Southern, Northern, Eastern, Western, and Central Africa), and national levels. The ISESCO identified primarily regional and national-level mechanisms whereas the SEAMEO articulated strategies at the regional/Secretariat and center/national levels, see the description of strategic plans for detail.

This organizational structuration could lead to and support expanded professionalism and education consultancy at regional and national levels. The RIGOs are thus positioned to establish and promote *epistemic networks* deemed vital for educational development in their respective regions. Organizational professionalism (Chabbott, 1998) seems vital for success and this corroborates with UNESCO (2017) finding that "different parts of the world are establishing peer learning educational processes through regional organizations with educational agendas" (p. 1). The epistemic networks the RIGOs established transcend their organizational boundaries; they also 'enroll' other actors into their 'nodes'.

### **Otherhood**

Institutional theory posits that the statelessness of world society and the disjunction between intention and practice lead to the emergence of otherhood (Meyer, 2010). The findings of this study corroborate with the concept of otherhood. First, RIGOs themselves are of otherhoods, as their founding is justified by 1) the absence of a world or regional state coordinating educational development in their regions, and 2) the decoupling between the policies and practices of nation states to offer quality education for all. As otherhoods, they position themselves to contribute to educational development in their respective regions.

Second, once they joined the rank of otherhood, they realize decoupling between their ambitions and capacities. They thus seem to enroll other otherhoods into their networks. The presumption is that successful implementation of their strategic plans requires contributions by other actors, which are also considered vital to ensure RIGOs' legitimacy.

The strategic plans identified the otherhoods that presumably contribute to educational development. While the 21 SEAMEO centers are synergizing with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ISESCO members of the National Councils include representatives of the

ministry of education, relevant government departments, religious and media institutions, civic society and unions. The AU established partnerships with the Association of African Universities; ADEA; and the economic communities spread in Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western, and Central Africa. It is also recognized the significance of funding sources from partnerships; South-South cooperation; private investments; foreign direct investments; and diaspora engagements. For expert guidance and potential funding, ALECSO also has identified partnerships with UNESCO, ISESCO, Council of Europe, and ADEA.

Such partnerships are considered vital for securing technical, material, and financial support. Inter-regionalism- linkages and engagements among regions- is sought to facilitate development (Olds & Robertson, 2011). As institutional theories explained (Meyer, 2010), otherhood functions to make RIGOs better actors in their domains of influence. Otherhoods are also used by RIGOs as mechanisms of legitimizing their organizational identity as expert communities.

### **Scientization and Rationalization**

More than ever before, the authority of science seems to be called upon to address societal challenges (Meyer, 2010; Niemann, 2018; Zapp, 2020). In the case of RIGOs, scientization and rationalization presumably provide sufficient grounds for justifying and legitimizing their rise and operations. The RIGOs subscribe to the view that world society is a cultural construction of shared understandings, which are mainly results of scientific work. The RIGOs also appear to explain at length how scientific they are in developing their strategic plans. To implement their strategic plans in their member countries, they aspire to rely on the expertise of their expansive structures, expert committees, and other established scientific organizations.

Specifically, while SEAMEO relies on its Secretariat and the 21 centers to offer expert guidance and support, the Consultative Council, the National Councils, and Expert networks in member countries function as the 'intellectual arms' for ISESCO. The AU's scientific arms include the Specialized Technical Committee of Education, Science, and Technology, and the working groups in member countries. The ALECSO's Observatory, the Program Council, and the National Committees in member countries coordinate all expert work linked to educational development. Not least important is that RIGOs have created partnerships with established regional and global expert networks including the UNESCO.

All these seem to reaffirm RIGOs' positioning as scientific and rational actors engaged in the production, dissemination and application of knowledge. As per the tenets of institutional theory and discourses of the knowledge society, the RIGOs appear to mainstream expanded models of actorhood, leading to expanded professionalism and education consultancy in their respective regions. Their very organizational existence seems to be justified by instituting science and reason to their organizational work.

The foregoing discussion reveals that RIGOs positioned themselves as significant actors in educational development in Africa, the Arab world, and Southeast Asia, playing several complementary and sometimes conflicting roles. Implications for educational regionalism, education policy and further research follow.

### **Implications for Policy and Future Research**

The aspirations and approaches of the RIGOs generally seem to mimic the aspirations and approaches of established global actors such as the UNESCO. They appear 'extensions' of or regional 'versions' of the UNESCO, as both have elaborate structures and arrangements at the regional and national levels to influence educational development in line with the SDG4. The

RIGOs and the UNESCO structures appear to have overlapping, if not conflicting, roles and expectations at the national level.

Although RIGOs acknowledge the global as important otherhoods in educational development, they seem to lack a clear specification of their mandates at the national level. This might lead to duplication of efforts or might ‘overwhelm’ or ‘irritate’ the national ministries of education regarding policy making, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting routines. For effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability reasons, the RIGOs need to identify more robust mechanisms of aligning and coordinating their efforts with the efforts of other global and regional actors. Meaningful inter-organizational alignment and inter-regional partnerships in education policy can also reduce the decoupling effects discussed above.

Positioning themselves as epistemic organizations, RIGOs need to give supreme importance to the production and management of contextualized knowledge. Elaboration and appropriation of global models might not be at par with their organization ‘gait’ as epistemic regional organizations. Knowledge production that better reflects regional and national perspectives and realities could support evidence-based education policy making, strategic planning, and educational development generally.

Strategic plans, the units of analysis for this study, are organizational best intentions whose implementation could be compromised by emerging conditions. Strategic plan analysis does not thus necessarily equate actual situation or realities. Further empirical studies that explore actual implementations and associated challenges in the member states and using critical theories and discourse analysis are thus needed. Exploring how and to what extent RIGOs coordinate and mobilize global and national actors is also crucial. An examination of the power dynamics among the global, regional, and national actors might similarly prove interesting, as RIGOs count on the global and even the national as sources of funding and expertise. As RIGOs claim to have regional saliency, a closer exploration of how they draw on and promote regional and national contexts and realities is equally significant. Not least interesting to further study is how the AU, ALECSO, and ISESCO deal with certain countries which are members of all the three organizations. The points of views of the national and global actors as to the positioning and functions of the fast-emerging RIGOs are also significant areas for further research.

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