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DOES WATCHING HELP? IN SEARCH OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE FOR EDUCATION MONITORING

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ABSTRACT

Following the publication of the 2015 Global Education for All Monitoring Report, this paper examines the question of how watching and reporting on these global goals might prompt changes in education. What is the function of monitoring and publicizing of information about progress in education? What is the effect of global monitoring? How does it impact on educational policy? While recognizing that the exponential growth in education is a consequence of general social and economic progress, the paper examines how the soft power of the United Nations, and global agreements such as Education for All, may affect ideas and strategic calculations of stakeholders and thus, in turn, lead to policy change. The paper highlights the importance of watching and asserts that, although monitoring is not indicated as a source of predictable progress, it is a way to position the ideas that influence how people talk about education.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015 Education for All (EFA) concludes its 25-year cycle, and the Global Monitoring Report (GMR) has published its final assessment of triumph and defeat in reaching the six EFA goals. Now international efforts are focused on defining new Sustainable Development Goals, including education as just one of many. But now is also the time to stand back and ask hard questions.

The twin assumptions behind declared goals are, first, that progress is possible and, second, there is some purpose to measuring, comparing, and publicizing progress. The first assumption seems safe, provided governments and international organizations are serious about the goals they endorse. Defending the second assumption, after a critical review, is the aim of this essay. Before the United Nations (UN) adopts a new monitoring framework based on new targets that will replace those of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the EFA movement, and before the UN authorizes a new accounting of progress, it is important to ascertain the effect of monitoring. Doing so would require an empirical effort beyond the scope of this essay. As a first step, however, it is essential to consider the underlying theories of monitoring.

The hope of periodic reports from UNICEF, UNDP, ILO, WHO, or the World Bank is that assessments of change can promote the very changes they try to monitor. It is only a “hope” because these organizations have no enforcement apparatus to hold nations or multilateral organizations to account for neglecting declarations or national ratifications of treaties. Soft power works because of the accepted legitimacy of the apparatus for assessing and reporting on adherence to shared norms. What were the shared norms or treaties monitored by the GMR?

In reality, there were no EFA treaties, and so the monitoring of educational progress differs from reports mandated by international law, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. EFA never generated the unanimity that is reflected in public health goals, and neither could it coerce nations into compliance since there are no “violations”. What EFA did generate was an independent, research-based progress report.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND ASSUMPTIONS

Even before addressing the question about how watching and reporting on EFA may advance the very change it documents, there are two issues that should at least be considered. First, was there indeed progress needing to be explained? And, second, does any agency at all cause such change, or are policies and declarations themselves the endogenous effects of deeper demographic or economic change? Close reading of the GMR’s research (including some that I contributed over the last year) shows there were countries that continued and countries that even accelerated their progress since the inception of EFA, notwithstanding that none of the EFA goals have yet been fully attained worldwide. This is good news, mainly for the children and adults benefiting from greater

opportunities, but also for education researchers, because there is something to be researched and explained.

But there is an assumption beneath the specific question about how monitoring might advance education: planned actions by states and their lobbyists – so goes this assumption – drive educational expansion and improvement. While it seems reasonable, the question has been debated over generations of comparative education research (it is a debate avoided, interestingly, by practitioners and advocacy organizations, as well as UNESCO). At issue is whether *any policies at all* expand educational opportunities. Alternatively, education may grow exponentially as a function of urbanization, population, or economic growth, just as paved roads and electric power spread worldwide, even without a global movement of “Electricity For All.”

One possibility is that there was an emerging global consensus by publics and governments about the value of schooling. This notion led eventually to a theory of a “world culture” with shared values about the equal individual worth of potential citizens. That interpretation has never been fully accepted by critics, who are skeptical of the rise of universal values about education and who see profound cultural and political differences worldwide. Critics also note that, if we zoom in to the national level, state actions and local politics clearly can shape the construction of education.

And yet, general exponential growth is undeniable if we zoom out to view evidence over long historical periods. In all regions, and with only a few exceptions, education has expanded – for girls, for minorities, and for the poor – regardless of differences in particular government policies. This expansion underscores a need for humility when assessing the impact of EFA or its monitoring (perhaps a “Jomtien effect” or a “Dakar effect”). If education is indeed expanding exponentially, then asking whether change accelerated after any particular year will usually lead to an affirmative finding.

CLUES FOR A THEORY OF CHANGE

In the 1990s, rights theorists began to understand that treaties and declarations did not merely reflect interests of their signatories, but also socialized them through changing the discourse and the framing of problems. One way this could happen is by redefining what issues are considered “problems.” Global norms and expectations for countries (whether concerning human rights, the environment, copyright protection, or education) are expressed through treaty conventions within the United Nations legal system. In at least some cases, there is evidence that they can help protect rights of citizens in signatory countries (for a review, see Hafner-Burton 2012). Boyle and Kim (2009) showed that a nation’s ratification of child and human rights treaties indirectly affected children’s well-being by empowering civil society organizations. Byun et al. (2014) further showed that the timing of ratification of a child labor treaty was related to the degree of the disadvantage suffered by working children in their academic proficiency.

Table 1. Possible effects of human rights regimes

Mechanisms	Modes of social interaction	Underlying logic of action
Coercion	Use of force, Legal enforcement	Hierarchical authority
Incentives	Sanctions, Rewards	Logic of consequences
Persuasion	Arguing, Naming/shaming, Discursive power	Logic of arguing and/or logic of appropriateness
Capacity-building	Institution-building, education, training	Creating the preconditions for logics of consequences or appropriateness

Source: Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 2013, p. 16.

In recent years, political scientists have shown that a human rights regime – once acceded to by governments – begins a spiral of activity leading to public awareness and demands. The puzzle remains of why any country would cede its domestic sovereignty. As Simmons (2009) asked: “Why should a sovereign government explicitly agree to subject its domestic rights practices to the standards and, increasingly, the scrutiny of the rest of the world?” (p. 59). Perhaps one answer is that such “agreements” are illusory. Political scientists in a Neo-Realist tradition argue that states never *voluntarily* concede sovereignty over domestic affairs, and suppose that any change brought about from international pressure must result from incentives, the threat of force (enforcement), or coercion. Risse and his colleagues (2013) have usefully summarized the mechanisms, modes, and underlying logic of change (see Table 1).

Neo-realists thus focus on the coercion and incentives for nation-states under an international legal order or alliance of power. By contrast, constructivists emphasize the persuasive and capacity-building potential of global agreements. Capacity-building is crucial for weak states with limited abilities to implement agreements, even when their leaders intend to do so at the time of joining a movement such as EFA. Which of these interpretations makes best sense of the function of monitoring and publicizing of information about progress in education?

NEO-REALIST AND CONSTRUCTIVIST INTERPRETATIONS OF MONITORING

Neo-realist perspectives on power can elucidate some elements of the EFA movement. Countries may not have entered voluntarily into the declaration but, instead, could have been pushed by non-state actors. Countries may also have been incentivized by the promise of greater financial assistance from donors. In either case, a neo-realist interpretation could help to explain the importance of monitoring and the publication of information. Access to information plays a key role in enforcement of legal treaties. Information about educational inequality can give national interest groups the tools to mount a successful legal challenge to governments. Another type of enforcement could be through economic disincentives for ignoring an apparent global consensus.

Closely related to the coercive power of disincentives was the promise of incentives to ensure progress, a feature also sensible from a neo-realist perspective. The Dakar Framework for Action famously affirmed that “no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources,” and it promised new international assistance for countries that commit to reaching the ambitious EFA goals. Monitoring progress was suggestively linked – though never explicitly – to financial support from international partners. Although finance is not the focus of this essay, something ought to be said about the success of the envisioned feedback loop between monitoring and financial support. The story is brief, unfortunately. The summative 2015 GMR assessment of finance shows that donor responses to the Dakar Framework were anemic at best. The EFA coordination architecture did not match country efforts with international support to achieve goals. It is unlikely that monitoring promoted education for all by its linkage to funding, and thus the neo-realist interpretation of information-gathering and dissemination appears doubtful.

Constructivism offers a better explanation for monitoring than does neo-realism. Except in the most extreme and exceptional cases, human rights treaties (and, possibly, non-binding declarations like EFA) effect policy change through persuasion and capacity building, not the sanctions and incentives predicted by neo-realism. Global movements like EFA work by publicizing information, which can affect ideas and strategic calculations of publics. That international human rights regimes diffuse information is an assumption of research on how such regimes effect improvement.

The regulatory influence of published indicators is not mainly exercised directly by the organization promulgating the information. As Davis et al. (2012) have shown, in many cases “indicators have regulatory effects primarily because they have been embraced as guides to appropriate conduct by actors within the state shaping national governmental decisions on national governance” (p. 16). The prestige that accompanies positive evaluations can incentivize countries to seek to upgrade their world status by responding to domestic as well as international pressures (World Bank, 2015, p. 44).

The EFA movement comprised governments which, at least publically, agreed to goals for their own national progress. EFA monitoring thus does not openly oppose governments but,

instead, publicizes their progress toward or retrogression from their own declared goals. In this sense, monitoring in education owes a debt to Helsinki Watch, which was established in 1978 to monitor the Soviet Union's compliance to the Helsinki Accords, and to the reports of subsequent Human Rights Watch groups that grew out of the original Helsinki Watch.

Rights reports effect change by speaking directly to citizens, not governments, since governments already possess information about their own rights violations (or their failure to make educational progress). Simmons (2009) argues that: "Nobody cares more about human rights than the citizens potentially empowered by [rights] treaties. No external – or even transnational – actor has as much incentive to hold a government to its commitments as do important groups of its own citizens." (p. 154).

From a constructivist theoretical interpretation, information works because states are not the only or even the main agents of educational change. NGOs and transnational social movements – of which the EFA is a prime exemplar – are equally as important even though they lack financial resources or coercive power. The UN legitimated the GMR's delivery of information because the UN is able "to constitute or construct new actors in world politics, create new interests for actors, and define shared international tasks" (Barnett and Finnemore 2009). Monitoring progress (or a lack of progress) helps to define while focusing attention on these shared tasks.

How might governments alter their support of education as a consequence of a watch by national or international agencies that then publicize these countries' records? On the positive side, political parties, civil society organizations, and NGOs can use information publicized by a legitimated, non-partisan, international source as a tool to lobby for change. However, there also could be negative consequences of negative publicity. Twenty-five years ago, when information was far less available about progress and failures (e.g. about reaching universal primary coverage or gender equity), government leaders were willing to join the club by supporting social movements, responding to peer pressure and exhortations to do the right thing. Signing a declaration, or even a treaty convention, was costless for repressive or negligent governments when there was no way to verify compliance.

Today, by contrast, could successful monitoring lead to reluctance by some governments to embrace universal, common targets, including universal targets in education? A current debate within the United Nations system is over the universality versus nationally-specific targets that ought to be included in Sustainable Development goals (including targets advocated by UNESCO). Some governments appear more hesitant than in 1990 to embrace to universal goals that later become mandates for "naming and shaming." This shows the power of information gathering and the near instantaneous publication of information in the internet age. Ministries realize today more than in 2000, and certainly more than in 1990, what it means to be "monitored." One of the participants in Dakar Forum was Cream Wright, who subsequently became chief of education at UNICEF. In a recent commentary, Wright (2014) urged greater ownership of the EFA movement by countries.

"It is time for countries to own EFA. Countries should not have to embrace ... goals and targets that are unrealistic.... A country should adopt goals that are within its reach and for which it can exercise full agency."

CAPACITY BUILDING?

The need for local ownership of a global movement underscores the fourth theoretical channel whereby Risse et al. (2013) hypothesize that rights regimes effect change: through building a capacity for nations to monitor themselves. In fact this was an implicit aim of the EFA movement. In Jomtien countries pledged that "each country, in determining its own intermediate goals and targets... will, in the process, establish a time table to harmonize and schedule specific activities...." Jomtien envisioned a shared responsibility whereby "governments, organizations and development agencies [will] evaluate achievements and undertake comprehensive policy review at regional and global levels." This was made no more precise in the Dakar Framework for Action (DFA) which, although it referred often to "monitoring," never specified exactly the entities to do this at different levels.

National and regional ownership of EFA and coordination by stakeholders was important to Abhimanyu Singh, who helped plan the World Education Forum in Dakar after serving as the national EFA coordinator for India. He not only chaired the global drafting committee of the Dakar Framework for Action, but he also was the director of the first post-Dakar monitoring report. In that 2001 UNESCO report, EFA activity at the national level, through partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), was considered of paramount importance (p. 11). The report also identified the establishment of national EFA forums and their quality as a major indicator of progress, finding with concern that 48 out of the 66 countries responding to a survey had no capacity for data collection or monitoring (p. 24). Singh (2014) has recently looked back with disappointment on the failure to develop national capacities for monitoring, commenting that "the expectation that the GMR would stimulate preparation of annual monitoring reports to assess EFA progress within countries and regions has not yet materialized."

Aside from technical and language-related barriers to capacity-building, there is another theoretical obstacle that should be considered in order to advance further. As the EFA movement became more like a hierarchical organization – both globally and within countries – it achieved greater efficiency. But grass-roots participation – essential for a national-level interest in monitoring – may be left behind, especially in countries such as Ghana where there are relatively few users of English in everyday life even though the main EFA coalition used English in its relations with international partners (Strutt and Kepe 2010).

CONCLUSION: SHAMAN OR METEOROLOGIST?

The language we now use to research and disseminate knowledge about the Education for All movement differs from the project of recent comparative education research.

To “monitor” health cross-nationally, or to monitor the world’s economic growth, poverty, inequality, or monitor the world’s progress toward shared education goals, means more than merely to “follow,” to “observe,” or to “track” change over time. Rather, the intention and connotation in English is to audit nation states and civil societies, to judge them, and to hold them to account, using an analogy with fiscal accounting. The terms used for “monitor” in the Spanish – and French – versions of the GMR – *seguir* and *suivre* – are closer to those non-judgmental meanings.

One early working title for the 2015 Global Monitoring Report was “What have we achieved?”(emphasis added). Fortunately, this was soon dropped. People with the job of monitoring trends have no divine power to change which way the wind

blows. Then again, watching is not without effect. If successful, it highlights some ideas (while obscuring others) and changes the way that ordinary people talk about education.

We still know little about when and why monitoring reports enter the political discourse and become used in legislation. Where are they taken up by national institutions, by teacher organizations, by religious leaders? How do NGOs use the monitoring reports produced by the GMR and by other agencies? These questions can be addressed through documentary sources and careful case studies of policy change, supplemented by interviews. After 25 years of EFA, and after 14 years of tracking global change, it is time to track the tracking and to assess its agenda-setting and capacity-building impact.

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