

Sonderdruck aus

State and Market in a Globalized World

Transatlantic
Perspectives

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Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg
2009

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Gita Steiner-Khamsi

International Knowledge Banks in Education: Catalysts for Competition, Coercion and Convergence

Over the past twelve years there has been a noticeable proliferation of international databanks. These knowledge banks are used to monitor a nation's development, report on possible setbacks, legitimize intervention, secure funding, and eventually promote the transfer of "best practices" from one nation to another. If that nation happens to be poor, then the interventions are external, the money flows in through grants and loans, and strings are attached to the "aid" it receives. A nation's development used to be measured against other nations' development. Increasingly, the method of simple comparison is today replaced by comparison against internationally agreed, or more accurately, internationally enforced standards. The growing role of international knowledge banks in this process marks a transition in international development policy, with dramatic implications for the role of the state. This chapter deals with three problematic features of international knowledge banks: they tend to propel competition, coercion and convergence.

I. International Knowledge Banks of Transnational Regimes

In the education sector, the World Bank has taken the lead in developing and drawing from its knowledge bank to influence national reforms. The concept of an international knowledge bank was first discussed at the Board of Governors of the World Bank in March 1996.¹ One of the options discussed was whether the financial lending operations should be delegated to the regional development banks (Asian Development Bank, African Development Bank, etc.) while the Bank itself focused on the

¹ P. W. Jones, "Taking the Credit: Financing and Policy Linkages in the Education Portfolio of the World Bank," in: G. Steiner-Khamsi (ed.), *The Global Politics of Educational Borrowing and Lending*, New York 2004, 188-200; P. W. Jones with D. Coleman, *The United Nations and Education. Multilateralism, Development and Globalization*, London New York, 2005.

lending of ideas. Three years later, in 1999, the World Bank's Global Development Network (GDN) was launched at a conference in Bonn.² The idea was to treat local best practices as a "public good"³ and make them globally available. As a result, policy transfer would ideally occur within and among the countries of the global South, replacing the practice of transplanting reform packages from the First to the Third World. Although the World Bank has not decreased its role as a money bank, it has acted, over the past decade, increasingly as a global monitor and lender of "best practices." Other international organizations such as Transparency International in the general public sector, or UNESCO (with its annual Global Monitoring Report) in the educational sector, have followed suit and acknowledged that monitoring national development against internationally set standards is a powerful strategy to influence national policy. In other words, the World Bank has not been alone in constructing and using international knowledge banks to gain leverage at the national level. Used as an advocacy tool, the ranking and scoring of nations along specific indices generates far greater reform pressure on low-income countries than more conventional strategies such as making grants and loans contingent on externally imposed conditions.⁴ In fact, in the wake of these more subtle strategies of inducing reform pressure from within, externally imposed conditionality appears as a crude means of promoting change.

It is important to distinguish between two types of knowledge banks that measure quality of education: The first type of knowledge bank – such as the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) knowledge bank – targets exclusively low-income countries, while the second type focuses on education in OECD (Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development) countries. I refer to the second type of databank as OECD- or IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational

² D. Stone (ed.), *Banking on Knowledge: The Genesis of the Global Development Network*, London, New York, 2000.

³ J. Stiglitz, "Scan Globally, Reinvent Locally: Knowledge Infrastructure and the Localisation of Knowledge," in: D. Stone (ed.), *Banking on Knowledge: The Genesis of the Global Development Network*, London, New York 2000, 24-43, 29.

⁴ For the development banks the conditions include structural adjustment, poverty reduction, and lately also good governance. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also engaged in a comprehensive review of its loan conditionality in 2000-2002. The outcome was a series of new guidelines on conditionality (IMF 2002) that emphasize, among other things, ownership and capacity to implement programs in the countries that borrow from the IMF. International Monetary Fund [IMF], *Guidelines on Conditionality*, Washington, DC., September 25, 2002.

Achievement)-type knowledge banks, named after the two organizations that administer international comparative studies on student achievement. Before I discuss in further detail several of the problematic features of international knowledge banks (competition, coercion, convergence), let me describe further the two types of knowledge banks.

1.1. The EFA-FTI Knowledge Bank

In 2002, the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) was launched at a meeting of the G8 in Monterrey, Mexico. The FTI was supposed to help reform-minded governments of lower-income countries implement universal basic education by the year 2015. The goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015 was inscribed in the international agreement Education for All (EFA) of 1990, and confirmed in the U.N. Millennium Development Goals of 2000. The ideas underlying the EFA-FTI were commonsensical and compelling to policy makers: governments from low-income countries need to be given incentives for borrowing "best practices" from other comparable educational systems. In order to reward reform-minded governments, the international donor community would commit itself to securing and providing the necessary funds for reforms, thereby placing such governments on the "fast track" toward development.

In 2002, 18 countries were invited by the G8 to submit proposals for consideration in the Initiative. FTI has grown exponentially since its inception. As of January 2006, twenty FTI proposals have been endorsed, and the World Bank expects another forty countries to qualify for FTI loans and grants. Apparently, the World Bank has chosen FTI as a tool to enforce donor coordination and advance evidence- or research-based lending under its tutelage. Even though more than 30 bilateral, regional and international agencies and development banks support the initiative, the main actor of FTI is its coordinating agency: the World Bank. The spirit advocated in FTI is one of "harmonization," in that all the thirty donors are supposed to be increasingly "using common arrangements for aid, sharing their technical and analytical work, and joining together on field missions".⁵

In contrast to the implementation of Education for All, which was (due to a massive lack of human and other resources) poorly coordinated by UNESCO, the FTI coordination is well-staffed and the FTI secretariat is hosted by the World Bank. FTI proposals appear to be highly analytical in

⁵ World Bank, Education for All – Fast Track Initiative, *Fact sheet: About Aid Effectiveness*, Washington, DC, October 12, 2005, 2.

that a host of statistical material is presented to demonstrate the need for immediate action. The authors hired to prepare a FTI proposal are expected to make a case that the educational sector is indeed in a crisis, in need of major and immediate external funding (from the FTI Catalytic Fund), and at the same time has the capacity to implement major reforms.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that their analyses are not only highly prescriptive but also agenda-driven. The FTI proposals confirm with great scientific rationality what the development banks and other donors already expect: the educational sector is indeed in a deep crisis and international donors are requested to approve, without further delay, loans and grants from the Catalytic Fund to remedy the crisis. As evidence for the need for immediate action, ample use is made of statistical material which international knowledge banks have amassed since the late 1990s. Once a government has signed off on a FTI agreement, it needs to bring its educational sector in line with the benchmarks outlined in the FTI Indicative Framework. Benchmarks are standards with a temporal dimension. In the case of the FTI benchmarks, the standards must be accomplished by the year 2015. Thus, most grant proposals to the FTI Catalytic Fund include talk of a crisis, an abundance of statistical information, and ideas on how to remedy the crisis through the adoption of "best practices".

The 2015 benchmarks of the FTI Indicative Framework⁶ address three areas: service delivery, system expansion, and system financing. For example, one benchmark determines that the average annual teacher salary should be 3.5 times the annual per capita GDP by the year 2015. Another benchmark requires that the student-teacher ratio should be 40:1. According to the World Bank, these benchmarks have been determined on the basis of empirical evidence.

First, researchers at the World Bank examined 155 developing countries and identified sixty-nine top-performing educational systems with regard to universal primary education completion rates. These sixty-nine countries were deemed to be "on track," because they either already have achieved universal basic education or are likely to achieve it by the year 2015. Then, in a second step, the researchers asked: what did these 69 low-income countries "do right" in the areas of service delivery, system expansion, and system financing?⁷ Table 1 lists the resulting standards or

⁶ B. Bruns, A. Mingat, and R. Rakotomalala, *Achieving Universal Primary Education by 2015. A Chance for Every Child*, Washington 2003, 73.

⁷ Ibid., 58.

FTI benchmarks that were established in 2002 based on a study of these sixty-nine top-performing educational systems in developing countries.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>2015 Benchmarks</i>
<i>Service Delivery</i>	
<i>Average annual teacher salary (as multiple of per capita GDP)</i>	3.5
<i>Pupil-teacher ratio</i>	40:1
<i>Spending on inputs other than teachers (as % of primary education recurrent spending)</i>	33
<i>Average repetition rate (percent)</i>	10 or lower
<i>System Expansion</i>	
<i>Unit construction cost</i>	\$6,500-\$12,600
<i>System Financing</i>	
<i>Government revenues as % of GDP (staggered targets proportional to per capita GDP)</i>	14/16/18
<i>Education recurrent spending (as % of government revenues)</i>	20
<i>Primary education recurrent spending (as % of total education recurrent spending)*</i>	50/42
<i>Private enrollments (as % of total)</i>	10

* Benchmark is 50% for a six-year primary cycle; 42% for a five-year cycle.

Table 1: Benchmarks for Primary Education Efficiency and Quality. Source: Bruns et al. 2003: 73

As mentioned earlier, the idea of creating a knowledge bank with "best practices" was launched in 1999 with the establishment of the Global Development Network. In the same year the World Bank started to analyze educational sectors of low-income countries to come up with standards or benchmarks to which governments (with the establishment of FTI) had to commit, in order to receive a loan or a grant from any of the 30 major international donors. Phillip Jones⁸ explains in detail the various stages of policy development at the World Bank and identifies the most recent one as the era in which the Bank sees itself more as an education policy lender than a loan provider.

I.2. OECD- and IEA-Type Knowledge Banks

The four international organizations that administer the most far-reaching or comprehensive student achievement studies are IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), OECD (Organiza-

⁸ P. W. Jones, "Taking the Credit".

tion for Economic and Cultural Development), UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). UNESCO and UNICEF exclusively address developing countries.⁹ In this section, I focus on the international knowledge banks administered by OECD and IEA, which compile information on the quality of education in developed countries. Very few countries in Latin America, Africa, Central Asia, or South East Asia participate in international student achievement studies of IEA or OECD.

Despite funding made available by the World Bank for low-income countries to participate in these studies, few opt to do so because they cannot enforce the rigorous technical standards of such studies, cannot afford to cost-share the enormous expenses, and simply because they do not see any use in having their educational systems compared to those of countries that are able to spend so much more on education.

In contrast, OECD- and IEA-type studies have become extremely popular in high-income countries. References to international performance standards and reforms implemented abroad, in particular, permit politicians and policymakers to draw comparisons with developments in other countries perceived as successful, providing them with a tool to substantiate the need for dramatic change at the local and national level.

The large-scale international comparative studies conducted by the IEA or OECD are a good illustration of this: while these studies have been conducted for several decades, they have gained major public attention only since the 1990s. The interest for international comparative studies is not only manifested in the boom of IEA studies comparing student achievement results across different schools, districts, regions, and nations.

It is also evident in the increasing number of countries participating in IEA studies¹⁰ as well as in the greater media attention given to cross-national analyses. The revitalization of international comparative studies is not surprising given that they lend themselves for "externalization" of educational reforms. "Externalization," as I discuss below, refers to the fact that politicians and policy makers are able to use international com-

⁹ The student achievement study Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) has been used since 1992 by UNESCO and UNICEF to assess basic literacy skills. It is the one and only student achievement study that is widely used in developing countries.

¹⁰ For example, the first Civic Education Study (1971) was part of the Six-Subject Study and comprised only nine countries, whereas 28 countries participated in the second Civic Education Study (1994-01).

parisons and cross-national analyses as external reference points to facilitate change in their own local or national contexts. Clearly, OECD- and IEA-type studies suggest the importance of examining institutionalized forms of transnational networking and communication, and scrutinizing the politics of league tables.

Starting in the nineties, ranking and league tables have become important policy tools to accelerate change and innovation in educational organizations.¹¹ For example, TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study), administered by IEA, generated tremendous reform pressure in the United States and in the United Kingdom.¹² Similarly, the results from OECD's PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment) made the headlines of all major German newspapers in December 2001, and continued almost on a daily basis to attract public attention in the German press, television, radio, and on the Internet. Particular attention was given to the low performance in reading literacy. Not only did German students score significantly below the average of other OECD educational systems, but the distance between students performing in the top five percent and the bottom five percent was greater than in all the other thirty-one participating countries.¹³ The great variation in reading literacy among students of the German educational systems triggered a major public debate on the need for fundamental educational reform, leading to demands for the introduction of standards, close and continuous quality monitoring, and a thorough re-consideration of the current highly selective educational structure, which tracks students into different secondary school levels. Armed with the intention to learn from experiences

¹¹ T. Kellaghan, "IEA Studies and Educational Policy," in: *Assessment in Education*, 3, (1996), 143-160; J. Lowe, "International Examinations, National Systems and the Global Market," in: K. Wilson (ed.), *Doing Comparative Education Research. Issues and Problems*, Oxford 2001, 55-370; P. Robinson, "The Tyranny of League Tables: International Comparisons of Educational Attainment and Economic Performance," in: R. Alexander, P. Broadford, D. Phillips (eds.), *Learning From Comparing. New Directions in Comparative Education Research. Volume 1*, Oxford 1999, 217-235.

¹² S. Gorard, "International Comparisons of School Effectiveness: The Second Component of the 'Crisis Account' in England?," in: *Comparative Education*, 37 (3) (2001), 279-296.

¹³ C. Artelt et al., "Leseleistungen deutscher Schülerinnen und Schüler im internationalen Vergleich. Ergebnisse und Erklärungsansätze," in: *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 5 (1) (2002), 6-27; J. Baumert et. al. (eds.), *PISA 2000. Basiskompetenzen von Schülerinnen und Schülern im internationalen Vergleich*, Opladen 2001.

from elsewhere, German comparative educational researchers have started to focus their attention on those educational systems in the PISA study that ranked top with regard to reading literacy (Finland, Canada, New Zealand) and to selectively borrow from these “more effective” educational systems.

1.3. The Politics and Economics of International Comparison

There are several factors that account for the great policy appeal of international student achievement studies. First, there is a move to evidence-based research in public policy in general, and outcomes-based education and standards-based education in school reforms in particular.¹⁴ These distinct movements demand that public policies be informed by concrete data, and that quality monitoring be enforced by means of continuous evaluation or, in the case of schools, by student assessments.

Thus, from a theory perspective, the ranking and league-tables of OECD- and IEA-type studies constitute a measurable and easily accessible, albeit often biased and abbreviated, form of “scientific rationality”.¹⁵ This particular feature of international comparative studies enables political stakeholders in education to appeal to the general public when planning or suspending a comprehensive reform.

According to Luhmann’s theory of self-referential systems, the act of policy borrowing, often presented as a lesson learned from elsewhere, is a form of externalization. Externalization, or references to other educational systems, functions as the final source of authority in the event of internal conflict or indecision within a national educational system about appropriate reform efforts.¹⁶ A focus on the politics of league tables would enable us to examine two forms of externalization in more detail. The first form of externalization is the reference to scientific rationality. Policy makers in different parts of the world increasingly use results from cross-

¹⁴ M. Chatterji, “Models and Methods for Examining Standards-Based Reforms and Accountability Initiatives: Have the Tools of Inquiry Answered Pressing Questions on Improving Schools?”, in: *Review of Educational Research*, 72 (3) (2002), 345-386.

¹⁵ N. Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference*, New York 1990; J. Schriewer, “The Method of Comparison and the Need for Externalization: Methodological Criteria and Sociological Concepts,” in: J. Schriewer in cooperation with B. Holmes (eds.), *Theories and Methods in Comparative Education*, Frankfurt/M. 1990, 25-83.

¹⁶ N. Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference*; N. Luhmann and K.-E. Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, Stuttgart 1979; J. Schriewer, “The Method of Comparison”.

national analyses, produced by OECD- and IEA-type studies, to evaluate the effectiveness of their own educational system. The second form of externalization is the reference to, and the selective policy borrowing and lending from, effective educational systems identified as league leaders in cross-national studies.

Both forms of externalization, reference to the scientific rationality evidenced by OECD- and IEA-type studies and reference to effective educational systems, are inextricably linked to the semantics of globalization to which policy makers tend to resort when they publicly justify the need for fundamental school reform in their own country.¹⁷ Policy makers resort when needed to such international knowledge banks to either generate or relieve reform pressure in their own countries. In other words, they use international league tables as external sources of authority to respond to or resolve conflicts that, upon closer examination, have been internally induced.

It seems that there exists three prototypical policy reactions, which I suggest labeling as scandalization (highlighting the weaknesses of one’s own educational system as a result of comparison), glorification (highlighting the strengths of one’s own educational system as a result of comparison), and indifference. It is further necessary to examine whether scandalization has led to increased policy borrowing (policy import from other educational systems), and whether glorification has led to increased policy lending (policy export to other educational systems). Examples of these different kinds of policy responses are listed in Table 2.

	TIMSS	PISA	CivEd
Scandalization	USA	Germany	N/A
Glorification	Japan	UK	N/A
Indifference	N/A	N/A	Germany

Table 2: Typology of Political Reactions to International Comparative Studies

By way of disclaiming the authority of visual representations, it is important to point out that I have only listed prototypical examples referring to three international comparative studies that were conducted in the 1990s: TIMSS (IEA), PISA (OECD), CivEd (IEA).

¹⁷ D. Tyack and L. Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, Cambridge 1995; L. Cuban, “How Schools Change Reforms,” in: *Teachers College Record*, 99(3) (1998), 453-477.

These studies were completed, and their findings published, in the 1990s and in the first years of the new millennium; thus, we can examine the policy impact that they have had. Two of the studies represent different subject matters that are generally considered core subjects, including mathematics and science (TIMSS), and reading literacy (PISA). The IEA Civic Education Study deals with a non-core subject matter (civic education), which is, often taught across several subject matters and supported with extra-curricular educational programs.¹⁸

As mentioned before, Table 2 only lists extreme policy reactions that have been well documented in the research literature. As a corollary, several cells have been left blank (marked "N/A"), because more detailed research would be required to identify prototypical cases for the corresponding policy reactions. Table 2 captures in summary form the policy responses and public reactions to the three international comparative studies TIMSS, PISA, and CivED. TIMSS, for example, triggered a lively public debate in the US media, which depicted as scandalous the weaknesses of the US educational system in math and science. Five years later, the publication of the PISA findings elicited a similar response in Germany, leading to a scandalization of the German educational system in the German media, as well as among German politicians and educational researchers. In contrast, the Japanese media glorified the Japanese educational system after the findings of TIMSS had been reported. Recently, a similar policy response by the U.K. official body for inspecting schools (OFSTED) could be observed after the publication of the British findings of the PISA study. In the case of the U.K., and to a lesser extent Japan, the glorification of one's own educational system led to a re-confirmation of ongoing educational reform. Another common policy reaction is indifference, especially if the subject matter under scrutiny is considered peripheral, had just undergone reform, or is seen as unlikely to be changed in the near future. The peripheral status of "political education" in the German school system explains why the IEA Civic Education Study encountered, compared to PISA, so little policy interest and even less public attention in Germany. The indifference towards the findings in the IEA Civic Education Study is striking given that Germany ranked low in several areas including positive attitudes of German students towards immigrants.

¹⁸ J. Schwille and J.-A. Amadeo, "The Paradoxical Situation of Civic Education in Schools: Ubiquitous and Yet Elusive," in: G. Steiner-Khamisi, J. Torney-Purta, and J. Schwille (eds.), *New Paradigms and Recurring Paradoxes in Education for Citizenship: An International Comparison*, Oxford 2002, 105-136.

Despite the difference in samples, there are many commonalities between knowledge banks for developing countries (e.g., EFA-FTI) and those for developed countries (e.g., OECD- and IEA-type studies). Both types of knowledge banks contain information on what works in education. Of greatest interest to policy analysts is the relation between the quality of education (measured in terms of student achievement) and system variables such as school entrance age, class size, education of teachers, or annual hours of instructions.

II. The Controversy over Knowledge Banks: Competition, Coercion and Convergence

There are at least three features of international knowledge banks that make them controversial. First, they draw on interstate competition. With the publication of league tables and international rankings, a nation's concern with "not falling behind" becomes tangible and palpable, ultimately being fueled by the fear of scoring low and thus being named and shamed publicly and internationally. Second, international knowledge banks are not only in the business of accumulating statistical information, they also monitor the development, lending, and selling of "best practices." While reform import is voluntary and selective in developed countries, and in the guise of "lesson-drawing" from other countries quite frequent, it is coercive and wholesale for developing countries. Third, using the same indicators for measuring the quality of education in different contexts, establishing common international benchmarks for achieving them, and finally recommending the same "best practices" for reforming educational systems makes cultural differences with regard to what constitutes "good education" disappear, and leads to an international convergence of national educational systems. As a result we end up with an international model of education that is heavily influenced by those who have designed, funded and administered the international knowledge banks in the first place. These three controversial features of international knowledge bank deserve brief explanation.

II.1. Competition

As with other public policies, the funding of educational reforms heavily depends on public support. In times of financial need, the language of the public need or public interest must be spoken to gain that support. As mentioned in the previous section, international comparison has become a popular policy tool for politicians to make a case in one direction or the other: either for generating reform pressure by scandalizing one's own system,

or for relieving reform pressure by glorifying the system's achievements.. The German Ministries of Education and Culture [Kultusministerien] proclaimed a Bildungsnotstand [educational emergency] in 2002 based on the poor ranking of German students in OECD's PISA study. Bipartisan support, followed by substantial funding, occurs often only under the condition that a state of emergency or a crisis has been declared.

This applies not only for developed countries—for example, Germany after the “PISA shock”—but also for developing countries. In fact, in order to qualify for support from the Catalytic Fund of the Fast Track Initiative sufficient proof must be provided to demonstrate that the country's educational system is seriously in crisis or “off track,” and therefore needs a boost from the international donor community.

Creating a crisis or an “educational emergency” with the objective of obtaining public and financial support is hardly a new phenomenon. It is more accurate to state that educational emergencies are nowadays easier to reproduce than before. One is able to access, without major effort, empirical evidence from international knowledge banks to demonstrate if necessary the dire need for fundamental reform of one's own system. In the United States, for example, a major “educational emergency” was declared in 1958, followed by several minor ones in the decades since. The most recent educational emergency was declared in 2006. In fact, there exists in the United States a long-standing history of periodically invoking an educational emergency.

Long before the “Nation at Risk” report was released in 1983,¹⁹ US politicians and policy makers recognized the favorable impact that an international comparison, especially if it makes one's own system look poor, can have on securing public support for educational funding. In the late 1950s, massive amounts of public funding were approved by the Congress to fight the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

No other resource mobilization in the 20th century compares to the public funds made available as part of the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA).²⁰

¹⁹ National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, Washington 1983. The report emphasized the superiority of Japanese and German education as compared to the US educational system.

²⁰ Association of American Universities, *National Defense Education and Innovation Initiative. Meeting America's Economic and Security Challenges in the 21st Century*, Washington, 2006.

A brief comparison of US educational reform strategies used during the Cold War and during the ongoing War on Terror is appropriate here. Since 2006, there has been talk of establishing a new NDEA as an educational offensive to win the War on Terror. Education was, like today, directly tied to national and global security, and federal expenditures for education more than doubled in the four years after the NDEA was implemented.²¹ Even though the funds were administered by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the language used to gain Congressional passage of the Act was soaked in the language of the military, provoking anxieties that the country would lose the race in science, technology and arms. The magnitude of NDEA becomes immediately apparent if we compare the educational measures of the late 1950s with those of today that the US government has initiated to combat the War on Terror.

Such a comparison is not far-fetched, since many political commentators compare September 11 (2001) to the launch of the Sputnik (October 1957). Both events were hyperbolized as shocks to the nation, and triggering a host of government interventions. In education, the parallel is striking, and is reflected in the 2005 National Security Language Initiative²², established by President George W. Bush, and the plan of Democratic senators, backed by the Association of American Universities (2006), to pass the so-called New NDEA (National Defense Education Act) of 2006. However, if the Federal Government were to allocate the same amount for education in the interest of national security as it did with NDEA in 1958, it would cost \$400-500 million, that is, roughly ten times more than it is spending today for Title VI and Homeland Security fellowships.²³ In both eras—the Cold War and the War on Terror—public expenditures for winning the “war” were massive. During the Cold War, however, the allocation of funds to the education sector was considerably higher—in fact, ten times higher—than today.

²¹ Senate of the United States, *New National Defense Education Act of 2006*. Session of the Senate of the United States, 13 June 2006. <<http://www.govtrack.us/congress>>, accessed 2 December 2006, 2)

²² In 2002, the US army reported the “serious shortfalls of translators and interpreters in 5 of its 6 critical languages” (Senate of the United States 2006: 3): Arabic, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Persian-Farsi, and Russian. The National Security Language Initiative is supposed to remedy the situation by producing 2,000 “advanced speakers of critical languages” by 2009 that could be employed by the US army, intelligence and government offices (Liebowitz 2006: B29).

²³ J. Brainard, “Defense Department Hopes to Revive Sputnik-Era Science-Education Program,” in: *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51 (36) (2006), A18.

Over the course of the past century educational spending skyrocketed several times after the government announced a state of emergency for education.²⁴ In policy studies, the term “policy window”²⁵ is used to mark the importance attached to the timing of a major reform. Something outside the educational sector needs to happen: a window of opportunity must open in order to secure public support for fundamental reforms. In order for the window to open, the public event must be turned into a disaster. Making recourse to shocking news in order to secure public support and funding for schools is not out of the extraordinary. Over the course of history, education has been presented as a panacea to combat immorality, poverty, unemployment, (ecological and other) disasters, (political and other forms of) apathy, epidemics, overpopulation, and today the myriad consequences of transnational flows of capital, communication, and culture. What is novel today, however, is that such dramatizations, some more effective than others, are made with recourse to global competition.

II.2. Coercion

What is for developed countries a process of harmonization is for developing countries a fact of coercion. The process of harmonization, that is, compliance with a set of transnationally agreed standards is voluntary. In contrast, low-income countries are coerced into adopting a set of reform programs as part of a grant or loan agreement. The outcome might be same—convergence towards international standards—but the circumstances and conditions of adoption are radically different.

The coercive nature of policy transfer does not imply that governments of developing countries lack agency. In our most recent study on educational reform in Mongolia,²⁶ we compared what government officials say in English towards donors with what they say in Mongolian towards their own national constituents. What is said to an international audience is traceable in education sector strategies, sector reviews, master plans, and loan/grant agreements. The language used in these documents is one of “global speak,” that is, a universal language of educational reform used in Mongolia as well as in any other developing country that depends on

loans and grants. As Samoff²⁷ points out, the language of education sector review is “strikingly similar” in countries that are aid-recipients. In the context of Mongolia, we tried to make sense of “traveling reforms,” or reforms that surface in different corners of the world including in Mongolia. Very often only the label is used (e.g., “outcomes-based education,” “student-centered learning,” “vouchers,” etc.), and the actual reform is quite dissimilar from the original.

Understanding the political and economic gains that are associated with speaking a universal language of educational reform helped us assemble the puzzle of policy borrowing. At the same time, we noticed that government officials take on a different position when they address local constituents.

Rather than labeling this practice double-talk, I prefer to call it policy bilingualism, where one set of reforms is advanced with the support of donors (“global speak”) and another, at times diametrically opposed, set of reforms is propelled with local or national means. More often than not, the money made available from international donors is redirected and channeled into supporting locally developed reforms, which in Mongolia are referred to as “national programs.” Government of aid-recipient countries are not helpless victims, but rather creatively deal with their economic dependence by redirecting funds into locally developed programs, by adopting the language but not the content of an imposed reform, by not enforcing implementation of an imported reform, or by only selectively adopting a reform.

A major component of international knowledge banks is a portfolio of “best practices” that are transferred along with loans and grants. The governments of low-income countries have no choice but to select from an existing portfolio. But how a government deals with the “best practices” once they have been imported is a different issue altogether.

In our study of educational import in Mongolia, we analyzed structural adjustment programs in the educational sector that were implemented in the mid-1990s. Ten years later, one reform was still in place (tuition-based higher education), one advanced and retreated (decentralization of educational finance and governance), and one partially reverted to a structure that was in place prior to the structural adjustment reforms (rationalization of staff and reorganization of schools). It was important to understand how

²⁴ See also P. H. Lindert, *Growing Public. Social Spending and Economic Growth Since the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge 2004.

²⁵ J. W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, New York 2003, 165.

²⁶ G. Steiner-Khamisi and I. Stolpe, *Educational Import. Local Encounter with Global Forces in Mongolia*, New York 2006.

²⁷ J. Samoff, “Education Sector Analysis in Africa: Limited National Control and Even Less National Ownership,” in: *International Journal of Educational Development*, 19 (4/5) (1999) 249-272: 25.

Mongolian government officials managed, for some reforms more than for others, to undermine, adapt, or modify the educational import to the needs in the country.

II.3. Convergence

The “global speak” that we noticed among Mongolian policy makers, can also be heard in other countries. In a remarkable analysis, Joel Samoff²⁸ found the education sector studies of African countries to be strikingly similar. In each and every education sector study he encountered a general crisis tone when “diagnosing the problem,” and an abundance of prescriptions for remedying “the problem”.²⁹ He observed that many authors start out with a general statement such as “African education is in crisis” and continue to insist that “... the government cannot cope, quality has deteriorated, funds are misallocated, management is poor and administration is inefficient”.³⁰ The prescriptive section of sector reviews produced in the 1990s, in turn, tended to rehearse similar sets of recommendations:

reduce the central government’s role in providing education; decentralize; increase school fees; encourage and assist private schools; reduce direct support to students, especially at tertiary level; introduce double shifts and multi-grade classrooms; assign high priority to instructional materials; favor in-service over pre-service teacher education. ³¹

Samoff’s astute observations illustrate agenda-driven applied educational research in the context of developing countries. This particular genre of research, characterized by a conjunction of funding and research, is saturated with medical metaphors such as “educational crises” that need to be overcome, or structural weaknesses of the educational system that need to be “remedied.” The metaphors, widely propagated by development banks, multilateral organizations, international non-governmental organizations are at the same time diagnostic and prescriptive. Since these agencies know in advance what the remedies or the prescriptions are – a reform package of “best practices” funded by their own organization – they retroactively diagnose the “problem” in ways that justify a loan or a grant. As mentioned before this is not to suggest that national governments merely sit in the backseat and watch international organizations slash their educational systems. On the contrary, the crisis-talk is often nationally employed as a

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁰ Ibid., 25.

³¹ Ibid., 25.

strategy to legitimize the need for reforms, accelerate ongoing reforms, or secure funding for pending reforms. National decision-makers in education tend to invoke an “educational crisis” when other, less dramatic strategies of resource mobilization failed. The crisis talk, standards and “best practices” are integral parts of evidence-based policy research which, in turn, heavily relies on knowledge banks that first compile and then make the international comparative data publicly available.

III. Conclusion

It is noticeable that the same educational reforms surface in different parts of the world, at times simultaneously and at times with a time lag. Two such global reforms, which are currently also heatedly discussed in Germany, are outcomes- or standards-based education in schools and tuition-based higher education. Until ten years ago, the first reform was regarded as an Australian or New Zealand reform related to New Public Management or New Accountability in the public sector, while the latter was associated with privatization in US higher education. Over the past few years, however, these two reforms seem to have become deterritorialized and gone global. Travelling reforms or policy transfers from one country to another have become the rule. David Dolowitz and David Marsh observe for the broader field of public policy studies that many fundamental changes in public policies seem to be affected by developments going on in other countries. These observations lead them to pose the question,

when we are analyzing policy change we always need to ask the question:
is policy transfer involved?³²

How and why policies of one country end up as reforms in another has become a major object of academic curiosity. A host of puzzling questions accompany travelling reforms: Why is something borrowed from elsewhere if similar reforms already exist domestically? Why is only the label but not the content of a reform transferred? What makes a reform exportable? Why are, after a while, traces to the original model eradicated? Why are ineffective or controversial reforms exported to other countries? These and other questions guide scholars in policy borrowing and lending

³² D. P. Dolowitz and D. Marsh, “Learning From Abroad: The Role of Policy Transfer in Contemporary Policy-Making,” in: *Governance: An International Journal of Policy and Administration*, 13 (1) (2000), 5-24:14.

research, social network analysis, and diffusion of innovation studies.³³ The prevalence of policy transfer has brought to light the existence of policy networks, think tanks, and institutions that interact transnationally and bridge several communities.³⁴

The renewed interest in diffusion of innovation studies, accompanied by a revival of policy borrowing and lending research as well as social network analysis, makes conventional approaches to studying public policy appear limited and insufficient. For example, one of the preoccupations in policy studies has been the gap or “loose coupling” between envisioned and enacted policies, or between policy talk, policy action and policy implementation. The focus on loose coupling between different dimensions of policy development has absorbed the attention of many policy analysts. Although the distinction between the different dimensions of a policy – talk, action, implementation³⁵ – remains essential, it needs to take into account the issue of policy convergence. At which level are national policies converging towards an international model? According to Bennett³⁶, public policy researchers have identified four processes that account for policy convergence: emulation (state officials copying actions taken elsewhere), elite networking (convergence resulting from transnational policy communities), harmonization (advanced by international regimes), and penetration (initiated by external actors and interests).

In the study on educational import in Mongolia, we attempted to understand why policy makers in one country – Mongolia – refer to globalization, that is, generate reform pressure by pointing at educational reforms in other countries.³⁷

We took a stance that is opposed to convergence theorists: although on the surface it appears that educational reforms in Mongolia follow the same pattern as in many other countries, the similarities disappear once a reform is examined on-site. Indeed, if we were to listen only to how

³³ G. Steiner-Khamisi, “Blazing a Trail for Policy Theory and Practice,” in G. Steiner-Khamisi (ed.), *The Global Politics of Educational Borrowing and Lending*, New York 2004, 201-220.

³⁴ S. Ladi, *Globalisation, Policy Transfer and Policy Research Institutes*, Cheltenham, 2005; D. Stone and A. Denham (eds.), *Think Tank Traditions. Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas*, Manchester, London 2004.

³⁵ D. Tyack and L. Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*; L. Cuban, “How Schools Change Reforms”.

³⁶ C. J. Bennett, “What is Policy Convergence and What Causes It?,” in: *British Journal of Political Science*, 21 (2) (1991), 215-233.

³⁷ G. Steiner-Khamisi and I. Stolpe, *Educational Import*.

government officials and international donors speak about developments in Mongolia, we would be led to believe that all global market-oriented reforms, ranging from the standards to the decentralization movements, also made it to Mongolia. But a closer look reveals that policy borrowing in Mongolia occurs either rhetorically or selectively with limited impact on existing practices. And yet, politicians, policy makers, and educators in Mongolia insist that educational reform in their country follows the same international standards as in other countries. There is obviously a message embedded in these types of public announcements that we sought to decipher in our study.

Arguably, the convergence question is too broad to yield new insights. It is flawed because it does not account for the existence of different policy levels. Of course, there is no convergence at the level of policy implementation; after all, contexts vary, and policies play out differently in various cultures. Furthermore, no supporter of the convergence thesis seriously claims that reforms are enacted in the same way, generating similar legislation and policy guidelines. There is always and everywhere a huge gap between policy talk and policy action. Stressing the loose coupling between envisioned and enacted policies is therefore a moot point. What are we left with when we take the distinction between policy talk, policy action, and policy implementation into account? At what level is convergence supposed to occur? Perhaps, what globalization does to national educational reforms is not more, but also not less, than propelling brand name piracy whereby every government borrows the same label, but gives it an entirely different meaning. Once we acknowledge the “global speak” of government officials, we begin to pay attention to the benefits of using a universal language of educational reform. Why this insistence on being part of a global reform movement? What is there to gain from aligning educational development with imaginary “international standards” in education? These kinds of questions led us to immerse ourselves in the politics and economics of educational borrowing in Mongolia.

Where does that leave us with regard to the competition, coercion, and convergence advanced by international knowledge banks? Arguably, multinationals such as, for example, the development banks, the U.N. organizations or nongovernmental organizations, apply different strategies of policy development than governments. Compiling a databank with “best practices,” and providing incentives for testing out these practices in one’s own system is likely to boost policy transfer. However, the relation between international knowledge banks and convergence of educational reforms is not that direct. The architects and administrators of interna-

tional knowledge banks believe in demand-and-supply driven change, and therefore must pretend the existence of a free market not only with regard to educational reforms in general but also with regard to their own portfolio of "best practices." In theory, the international knowledge banks are supposed to supply low-income governments with reform ideas on how to first monitor and then fix their educational systems, preferably by lesson-drawing from other countries of the global South. International knowledge banks are not supposed to create demand, but rather are supposed to be active on the supply side only.

In practice, however, the administrators of international knowledge banks are banks, and their business is first and foremost the provision of loans to low-income countries. It is a business that, in turn, relies on the governments of these countries demanding external financial assistance in the form of loans or grants. At times, the demand for external financial assistance is made at the same time or shortly after another major grant or loan agreements had just been signed. Such demands need to be substantiated, and the best proof is the existence of an educational crisis or an emergency. In the era of globalization and international agreements (Education for All, Millennium Development Goals, etc.) the most effective way to prove a need for financial assistance is to demonstrate that the country's educational system drastically lags behind the quality of education in other countries. Strikingly, the multilaterals provide technical assistance to governments to make such a case for an educational crisis or an emergency. Arguably, competition, coercion and convergence preceded the creation of international knowledge banks which, after all, have been in existence only since the late 1990s. The knowledge banks support, but have not produced, these features of policy development. What is, novel, however, is the proliferation of agenda-driven policy analysis propelled, funded, and administered by multinational organizations (development banks, U.N. organizations) as well as nongovernmental international organizations. This implies that international organizations periodically generate educational crises at national level, which then are supposed to be remedied with the import of global reform packages, and paid for from national revenues.