

## International organisations and policy-making in VET systems of developing countries

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### ABSTRACT:

Vocational education and training (VET) is considered to retain cultural patterns of work, vocations and vocation acquisition of a country and, thus, to be more resistant to changes in comparison with higher or secondary education sectors. One of the pillars of the stability of VET systems is actor constellations that are carriers of these cultural patterns. However, after World War II the influence of international organisations (IOs) as new actors in policy-making has started to be more obvious in matters of education, including VET.

This paper reviews the activities of IOs in vocational education and discusses the question of their influence on policy-making in this sphere from the institutionalist perspective with a special focus on developing countries and countries in transition. The theoretical findings suggest that these countries have not fully institutionalised VET systems and, thus, more recep-

tive to implement policies financed and disseminated by IOs, but these policies show dependencies on the activities of IOs and have varied degrees of sustainability.

### **KEYWORDS:**

vocational education, policy-making, reforms, international organisations, educational aid.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Education lies predominantly within the competence and responsibility of nation-states (Leuze et al., 2008). Policy-making in vocational education is more nationally defined than in secondary and higher education. Vocational education and training (VET) is considered to retain cultural patterns of work, vocations and vocation acquisition of a country and, thus, to be more resistant to changes in comparison with higher or secondary education sectors. Though countries may experience similar social pressure concerning youth socialisation and economic problems in the domain of skill supply, solutions how to plan and realise policies in VET for its effective functioning are diverse and determined by political, economic and historical traditions. One of the pillars of stability of VET systems with their policy patterns is an actor constellation that realises historically established steering and governing mechanisms.

After World War II and especially since the 60ties of the twentieth century the influence of international governmental and non-governmental organisations (in this paper referred to as IOs) as new actors in policy-making started to be more obvious

in matters of education, including VET. The neoliberal agenda once established in the economic sector also spread into other spheres including education (Connell, 2013). Neoliberalism is understood as an updated version of liberalism that originates from the economic theory and postulates the free reign of capital and market, private property and deregulation in economic and social relationships (Lakes & Carter, 2011; van Elteren, 2009). IOs became the main promoters of the neoliberal agenda in discourses, policies and organisation practices of educational institutions (Moutsios, 2009, p. 473). Policy-making processes in education were no longer defined solely by nation-states but overshadowed by the international influence (Grek, 2010; Leuze et al., 2008; Shahbaz & Tahir, 2014).

This influence became possible due to the growing interdependence of national economies, and social and cultural spheres. Globalisation brought the world closer to every nation but also made nation-states adjust to its flows of trade and production and migration of the labour force. Neoliberal approaches in the global economic world resulted in the rise of transnational corporations, on the one hand, and the advances in technologies prompted the appearance of the gig economy, on the other hand (Kaine & Josserand, 2019; Meirosu, 2020; Zwick & Spicer, 2018). Knowledge, skills and qualifications have gained new meanings and values on the market and in the social sector, thus, new expectations to education systems appeared. IOs started to provide tools for changes and reforms in education systems so they could best meet the needs of the global economy (Moutsios, 2009).

Since it is VET, which provides the population with relevant skills and appropriate qualifications for the labour market, it

has drawn a special attention from IOs. As an indicator of such attention may serve a considerable increase in international aid administered by IOs for vocational training in developing countries including countries in transition. Thus, the recent available in open access statistics of the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on the volumes of aid for education of developing countries by sub-sectors during 2005-2016 shows that vocational training is the only sector for which official international aid had grown more than four times within 10 years: from 375 million to 1,34 billion US dollars (OECD, na). Considering such impressive financial means directed at vocational education of these countries, a question arises what influence IOs have on development of vocational education and how they realise this influence on policy-making. The study is focused on developing countries and countries in transition as defined by the Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistical Use (M49) as of 2020 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2020). The question of influence of IOs on VET systems and their policy-making have been actively addressed by scientists (Akkari & Lauwerier, 2015; Ayonmike, 2019; Bartlett, 2013; McGrath, 2012; Middleton & Ziderman, 1997; Mikulec, 2021; Schröder, 2019; Shahbaz & Tahir, 2014) and important findings have been made. This paper, however, aims to look and explain what role IOs play in policy-making in VET systems from the institutionalist perspective. It has a theoretical character and analyses existing research findings on this topic through the lens of neo-institutionalism and historical institutionalism.

The paper is built as follows: as the first step, the theoretical framework to the research question is introduced. After it, roles,

instruments and measures of IOs are outlined in the next section. In the last part, the reactions of vocational education systems to global paradigms promoted by IOs are analysed and discussed on some examples of developing countries and countries in transition. Using the institutionalist approach, theoretical assumptions of such reactions are concluded. The paper finishes with a conclusion section in which the main statements are summarized and an outlook for further research is sketched.

## **INSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVES ON IOS AND VET DEVELOPMENT**

IOs and their activities are analysed within the context of globalisation. Dale (2000) distinguishes two approaches to the issue of globalisation and education: the “Common World Educational Culture” and the “Globally Structured Agenda for Education”. The “Common World Educational Culture” originates from neo-institutionalism and considers education as a construct of the world society, which shares common global culture and models. Here it is worth mentioning that the world culture is greatly defined by Western philosophies and ideologies. Western modernity shaped norms and values, which are centred on the modern legal state and the individual with their rights and freedoms. Since the origins of the global culture are rooted in the Western developed countries, consequently, the influence of the global world culture is more obvious in the non-Western developing countries. Unlike the approach of the “Globally Structured Agenda for Education”, which draws on the international political economy and considers education through the capitalist economy lens, education in the “Common World

Educational Culture” approach is seen as a resource to achieve the freedoms and values (Dale, 2000, p. 429). According to the world culture theory, the global education models spread around the world and diffuse with models of modern nation-states. As a result, the education models undergo the process of institutional isomorphism and convergence (Verger et al., 2012).

The empirically proven evidence of this theory cited by this scientific school is the expansion of mass schooling in African countries, which has not been related to the level of development (Meyer et al., 1977), and the establishment of the higher education area (Ramirez, 2012). IOs by spreading, disseminating or imposing models and norms among and on national states play one of the principal roles in setting universal policies on the global level and fostering the convergence of education systems (Boli & Thomas, 1997; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012).

However, when it comes to the policy-making in vocational education systems, there is a considerable body of literature proving that unlike higher or secondary education the development of a vocational education system is more stable, adherent to its contexts and historical developments (Busemeyer, 2009; Deissinger, 2015; Gonon, 2016; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, 2005). In the example of the German VET system, Deissinger (2015) demonstrates the resistance of the system to the trends of modularisation and the introduction of the qualification framework, which resulted from the Europeanisation influence on VET systems. Though the German qualification framework was accepted in 2013, it has “no judicative function and it may be assumed [...] will remain a paper tiger in many respects” (Deissinger, 2015, p. 617). From the point of view of historic institutionalism, such a situation is explained by the path-de-

pendent development, which vocational education systems tend to follow. The theory of path dependant development comes from historical institutionalism. Path dependencies appear as a result of recurring practices in institutions in which maintenance and stability actors have interests. Actors develop working patterns and once developed they adapt to them and try to preserve them, thus, stabilising the system and avoiding deviations (Pierson, 2000). Changes, if they happen, are much defined by the wide social environment and by the characters of the actors themselves (Thelen, 2006). Appearance and development of four classical skill formation regimes (statist, liberal, segmentalist and collective) (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012) in advanced industrial democracies illustrates the path-dependent trajectories of vocational education systems. The constellation of actors (companies, social partners and the state), the division of their responsibilities in providing, governing and financing vocational education and the level of institutionalisation of these relationships are core factors, granting the stability of VET systems, their gradual change and adaptation to external wider environments.

Unlike developed industrialised countries with strong vocational traditions and institutions, developing countries and countries in transition have a much lower level of institutionalisation, which is also applicable to their VET systems. They find themselves either at the starting point or at critical junctures that open the possibilities for different developmental paths and institutional settings (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). At this time, the continual support of stakeholders and policy actors has primary importance for skill formation systems so they can survive in the long term. The policy formulation in these times

is more receptive to changes and transformations caused by the global agenda and promoted by IOs.

## **TOOLS, MEASURES AND ROLES OF IOS**

One of the roles of IOs is to supply policy-makers on the country level with ideas, goals and instruments on how to solve domestic issues using certain governance instruments. The ideas can produce a powerful impact on policy development and reforms and align the country's policy with the global policy paradigm. This paradigm as mentioned before is drawn mainly on Western ideologies and values, thus, the activities of IOs are underpinned by these philosophies.

IOs are considered as “central carriers of liberal and neoliberal cultural principles and have been central in promoting education reform to national systems around the world” (Bromley et al., 2021, p. 25). The diversity of ideologies guiding these organisations complements each other and creates the global paradigm of the world culture. The World Bank is strongly focused on spreading neo-liberal policies in education such as decentralisation, privatisation, and commodification of education services. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) concentrates on promoting humanistic ideas like individual empowerment, human rights and social justice. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is dedicated to ensuring adequate skill development and economic efficiency. Similarly, the core agenda of OECD is the economic efficiency and development of human capital. The European Training Foundation (ETF) promotes reforms in the country's skill formation for the sake of economic growth



and prosperity. The mentioned agencies have a clear mandate in TVET, however, there are also other IOs that are active in vocational education but consider it as means to promote their specific agenda concerning sustainability, for example, the World Health Organisation (WHO) or the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (Hollander, 2005). It must be also taken into account that IOs are open systems. They are inclined to change their policy promotion as reactions to the changing social and economic environments as well as the interests and preferences of powerful nation-states (Grek, 2010). Geographically, these IOs have different spheres of influence. UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank are important players in the policies of countries of the global South. The OECD has an influence on the development of education in countries of the global North (Akkari & Lauwerier, 2015). ETF operates in countries of the post-socialist and post-soviet blocs (Hollander, 2005).

Instruments employed to produce changes in education policies differ in different IOs. A goal and the main philosophy of an international actor define the scope of governance instruments at hand to influence national policy-making (Niemann, 2009).

Leuze et al. (2008) developed a typology of such instruments:

- *discursive dissemination* is used by IOs to initiate discussion on policy issues. The brightest example in the field of school education is publishing results of the PISA studies by the OECD, which ignite governments of nation-states to introduce reforms in schooling systems in order to catch up with other countries;
- *standard-setting* is employed by IOs to establish rules for state policy. It can take the form of hard and/or soft laws.

The hard laws are binding if states are members of an organisation or union or due to treaties they signed. When exercising soft laws, IOs can set standards or objectives achieving which requires normative changes on the systemic level;

- the instrument of *financial means* refers to transferring financial resources to a country for enabling it to implement a programme that is approved by IOs. This type is often used by the World Bank, which provides financial incentives (predominantly in form of loans) for the programme implementation that is in line with its goals;
- *coordinative activities* mean that IOs can co-manage and coordinate policy activities by bringing together all relevant actors and, thus, creating favourable conditions for fostering and speeding the implementation of projects and programmes;
- the aim of *technical assistance* is to foster the transfer of ideas, policies, and mechanisms on how to implement a specific policy in a national context.

Referring to vocational education, not all IOs' governance tools may be used in policy-making due to the specifics of this type of education and its affinity to national traditions. Measures are mostly defined by neoliberal trends in the economic sector due to tight connections to the economic sector. Thus, most initiatives have been striving to harmonise educational outputs and levels and labour market demands of the knowledge-based economy (for example, qualification frameworks). Also, employability and mobility of the workforce have become defining in policy discourses in vocational education policies. The level of

a country's development is another defining criterion for the instrument of influence. For transformations of VET policies in developed countries, discursive dissemination and standard-setting are usual means, while in developing countries and countries in transition VET policies are shaped with the help of financial means, technical assistance and coordinative activities.

McGrath (2012) distinguishes five main measures used internationally to reform public VET systems into more effective skill formation regimes with the purpose to make them more accountable to business and guarantee higher chances of employability of VET learners: systemic governance reforms to provide employers with bigger possibilities to shape VET policies; qualification frameworks to ensure better transparency and mobility within vocational training systems; quality assurance systems to develop internal working quality standards acceptable for stakeholders; new funding mechanisms and managed autonomy for public providers that give more power and freedom in the decision-making process to VET providers.

IOs can exercise their influence at different stages of policy-making: agenda-setting, policy formation, policy decisions and policy implementation. Global actors usually try to affect policy-making during agenda-setting. The resulting decisions and their implementation are performed by national actors with the probable involvement of non-governmental actors (Jakobi, 2009). However, they can also be directly involved in policy formation as experts when defining concrete objectives, evaluating operational elements of policy etc.

## REACTIONS OF VET SYSTEMS TO GLOBAL PARADIGMS

Reactions of VET systems to the activities of IOs in influencing policies depend on many factors and are extremely difficult to model or predict. From the analysis of developing and launching national qualification frameworks, it is possible to conclude that developed countries with established and institutionalised skill formation systems required more time to introduce national qualification frameworks at least on the normative level. At the same time, countries in transition managed in a shorter time either to design or even introduce the national qualification frameworks in their legislation (see reports European Training Foundation, 2011; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL] et al., 2019). Vocational education systems in developing countries and countries in transition tend to more actively implement changes and reforms fostered by IOs. However, there is a problem with such reforms because in a long-term perspective they show different degrees of sustainability. For example, radical reconfigurations of the VET system in Chile from a state-controlled into a market-oriented one (1973-1989) were restricted by contextual factors and revealed “a mediated influence of global paradigms in national policy changes” (Valiente et al., 2021, p. 289).

The mentioned tools and instruments provide a partial explanation why the influence of IOs on VET systems in developing countries and countries in transition often resides on the normative level and faces problems at the operational level. Since technical assistance and financial means are commonly used tools of influence, then changes and reforms in vocational education tend to be dependent on the donors’ assistance. Thus, for

instance, TVET projects implemented in Jamaica and Ghana empirically proved to have “ideological dependency” on donors’ assistance (Powell, 2001, p. 429). The research on the effectiveness of reform implementation in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Northern Africa and the Middle East, conducted by the European Training Foundation, confirms that in a third of the 25 investigated countries changes implemented in VET policies happen to be detached from real needs and situations of the specific national contexts and demonstrate a “track record of dependency on official development assistance” (Milovanovitch, 2019, p. 305). It leads to the realisation of the changes in the policy on the normative level at best and questions their sustainability after programmes or projects are finished. Changes, driven by different and probably even opposite motivations and explicit and implicit goals of both parties IOs, on the one hand, and the local actors, on the other hand, may produce adverse effects and undermine the sustainability of transformations. International assistance in reform implementation in the Western Balkans failed to achieve its objectives because of long chains of involved actors that had different incentives ranging from altruistic motifs of taxpayers of the donor countries to pragmatic motivations of the actors in the domestic recipient country to quickly fix internal problems with the external help (Bartlett, 2013). Changes in educational policy and reform process are “the first step in an uncertain journey of implementation. What finally emerges from this journey may only faintly resemble what was envisioned” (Williams & Cummings, 2005, p. 27). Implementation of policies disseminated by IOs undergoes a process of localisation and customisation of these policies that are defined apart from economic and social conditions of

the context also by norms and cultural patterns of national policy actors. Therefore, patterns of policy change bear imprints of philosophies and ideas of IOs but also patterns of core societies.

Mechanisms of the indirect influence on VET policies have better chances to produce sustainable results because the pragmatic interests of the local stakeholders and policy-makers are absent, thus, policy changes are more relevant to the needs of the context. The example of policy transfer fostered by IOs to the adult education policies of Slovenia, a central European country with the socialist past, proves that in favourable conditions there is hardly a necessity to impose and disseminate changes top-down or encourage it financially. IOs have promoted policy transfer and presented themselves as risk experts, who are able to manage the risks Slovenia is or could be facing (Mikulec, 2021). It means activities of IOs have far better effectiveness and sustainability when they are defined by the context of the country rather than the agenda of IOs. To secure the sustainable development of a policy in a country it must be not decoupled from the needs and expectations of the realities of this country. Thus, more attention and support must be paid to grassroots initiatives in vocational education. Ayonmike (2019) in the study on the role of industry and IOs in the development of technical and vocational education in Nigeria comes to the conclusion that local policymakers should foster collaboration between the local industries and IOs, thus, making policy changes drawn on the needs and expectations of the local agents instead of implementing the transformations that probably would be more suitable to the agenda of IOs but would be detached from the contexts. Empowering vocational teachers and promoting cooperation between vocational teachers, industries and international edu-

cation promises good prospects for positively transforming VET policies in a relevant way. In the example of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries, Paryono (2015) states that creating a platform for sharing concerns of vocational teachers with stakeholders and IOs can bring changes in the quality of vocational teacher training that will bring benefits to various stakeholders of the TVET system across the region and beyond.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The analysis of the influence of IOs on policy-making and development of VET systems in developing countries and countries in transition from the institutionalist perspective shows that, unlike the policy changes in higher and secondary education, which is subject to the influence of the neoliberal paradigm and globalisation (Mantzou, 2019), policy-making in VET is stronger defined by national traditions of vocation acquisition, cultural norms and social perceptions of work and its role in the life of an individual and a society (Gonon, 2009, 2016). The economic sector probably more than any other sphere is shaped by neoliberalism. However, when it comes to vocational education, which has stronger connections to the economic sector than other types of education, policy changes and reforms show different patterns. That is largely conditioned by the path dependent development of VET systems. Countries with strong traditions and institutionalisation in vocational education show bigger resistance to the agenda set by IOs (for example, introduction qualification frameworks). On the contrary, developing

countries, which usually have low degrees of institutionalisation in VET governance and policies, tend to be more susceptible to the influence of IO's activities and their agenda. However, it refers predominantly to the normative level, i.e. reforms and changes stay in the legislative realm but their implementation may have a low degree of effectiveness. If it happens such changes can hardly be sustainable in a long-term perspective.

Unlike the influence on skill formation of developed industrialised countries, IOs exercise their influence on VET policy-making in developing countries and countries in transition in the form of technical assistance, coordinative activities and financial means. It does not exclude the other tools of IOs, however, they call forth comparatively low reactions from policy-makers of developing countries.

Though the effects of education international aid in the form of small projects might be modest on national policy-making, they still have importance at the local level (schools or regions). Such local changes when accumulated may influence the policy agenda in a country by spreading grassroots initiatives. They create favourable conditions for incremental changes in which policies and reality are not decoupled.

Since institutions are made up of actors and policy and changes are determined to some extent by cultural characters, philosophies and motifs of these actors, it might be relevant for further research to investigate and compare internal and external motivations of actors in international assistance and cooperation that is IOs and local domestic actors in VET systems. It might provide some answers to the question of the sustainability and effectiveness of IOs' activities in different contexts. It would be useful to conduct a cross-country qualitative compar-



ative analysis to identify other factors that define policy changes in VET in developing countries and its dependency on international education assistance.

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