

A NeverEnding Story: Tracing the OECD's evolving narratives within a global development complex.

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Abstract

This paper applies insights from narrative theory to analyse the OECD's transition to providing humanitarian large-scale assessments under the SDGs, situating this within the evolving dynamics of a global development complex. The perspective is guided by the thematic interests of the special issue, with the goal of enriching understanding of both the OECD's changing positions and capacities in the global field, and the theories, ideas and styles of reasoning it has employed (as well as how they operate). The paper takes its starting point from recent scholarship in international relations (IR) that has applied narrative to the study of international organisations, highlighting the central role of strategic narratives in forging world order and in establishing organisational legitimacy. We describe the core narrative as akin to a Three Act Play (with five stages) which we use as a heuristic device to trace the entwined development stories of PISA and the advent of Humanitarian Assessment in international development.

Keywords

Learning Framework 2030; Learning Compass; global governance; Sustainable Development Goals; strategic narratives

I. Introduction

In 2015, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals established "17 goals to transform our world"¹, setting out an international agenda until 2030. The Goals resulted from a long process of negotiation between a diverse array of stakeholders with divergent interests and agendas, and yet they superficially present a unity of purpose and meaning. While this unity has always been diffuse and defied simple interpretations, Robertson and Dale (2015) highlight the

¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

‘thickening’ of global governance, noting that since 2000 ‘a new set of global players’, including international organisations such as the OECD, World Bank, and corporations, such as McKinsey and Pearson, have extended their authority at the expense of UNESCO, raising new interpretive challenges for studies of global education governance.

Ydesen (2019) observes that this ‘global governing complex’ in education arises from the complex interactions of multiple stakeholders, and highlights the problems presented by “the number of interactions between contexts and agents in different positions, the different outlooks and meaning-making agendas, that provide a complex picture of discursive struggles, promotions, resistances, inertias, modifications, and transformations” (297). While its complexity defies neat interpretation, an entry point is provided by Singh (2018), who characterizes efforts by international organizations to improve human well-being and uplift millions from poverty as “one of the greatest stories begun in the last century” (134). Singh (2018) elaborates:

The idea of international development is a story... with no fixed content. But it does allow various organizations, states, and peoples to connect. In this sense, the idea of international development constitutes the ‘imagination experience’ for improving human conditions in the developing world. (Singh 2018, 136)

Herein, we explore how OECD narratives have evolved within the ‘great story’ of international development to secure and expand its role within a global governing complex. While the idea of a great story may seem like a dubious starting point, Singh (2018) introduces the characterization within a recent seam of scholarship in international relations (IR) that highlights the central role of strategic narratives in forging world order (Miskimmon et al. 2013). This intersects with the interests of the special issue in several key respects.

First, the focus on narrative complements studies of political institutions and material power, illuminating the complex ways in which institutions and power are embedded in narrative schemes and communication networks, and in particular, a new ‘media ecology’

(Miskimmon et al. 2013). The OECD's marketing and use of media outlets to promote its assessment frameworks is central to its success (Robertson and Sorensen 2017; Grey and Morris 2018), as has the appeal of its statistical work which allows policymakers to attach numbers to their narratives (Ydesen 2019). Second, the concept of strategic narratives relates to literature that views international organisations from the perspectives of 'a struggle for survival' (Ydesen and Grek 2019), 'organisational legitimacy' (Edwards et al. 2018), and as 'regimes' (Tikly 2017).

The paper opens with insights from Singh's (2018) historical analysis of contested narratives of international development. The analytical framework was developed by supplementing international relations literature (Miskimmon et al. 2013) with insights on the role of narratives in policy, social movements, and in fiction (e.g. Shanahan et al. 2011; Davis 2003; Wolf 2018). This yielded a series of narrative elements and a heuristic story schema, which we present in three Acts. We use this as an interpretive frame for tracing the OECD's evolving narrative as it aligned with the SDGs. The analysis draws on existing commentaries, reconceptualises our own work, and reviews OECD reports that introduced its new paradigm for development and Education 2030 frameworks (e.g. 2003; 2005/2008; 2011; 2013; 2018), supplementing these with relevant reports by other influential actors engaging in education governance post-2015 (e.g. World Bank, UNESCO, UIS, and Pearson).

Our analysis illustrates how the OECD has adapted and evolved as it attempts to secure and expand its influence. Specifically, the narratives that emerge retain characteristics of the PISA narrative, characterised as the 'global education race' (Sellar et al. 2017), but supplement the emphasis on cognitive domains and economic competitiveness with humanitarian discourses oriented towards 'collective wellbeing'

II. Plotting Development

(i) *A great story: The runaway imagination of bureaucrats and technicians*

Singh's (2018) characterisation of international development as a 'messy story' focusses on the contested and evolving narratives of development. Beginning his account in the "gilded halls of the United Nations," Singh traces how "the imaginations of technocrats and international organizations charged with a development mandate after World War II" (134) followed U.S. President Harry Truman² by identifying half the world's population as 'developing', and how this grand story has been institutionalized and re-interpreted by different international organizations. His analysis culminates with the formation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which is where our analysis commences. Singh (2018) focuses on the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the United Nations Development Program, and UNESCO, allowing us to consider how the OECD has adapted to enhance its influence within this development complex.

Miskimmon et al. (2013) identify three stages of agenda-setting in international relations: *the formation of a development narrative among elite actors; its projection onto states and societies through varying communication mechanisms; the reception, acceptance or contestation of the narrative by global humanity and the audience affected.* This process is supplemented with three main narratives. First, *system narratives*, in which agency is inherent, detail the nature and structure of international affairs and provide representations of how the world is, or should, be. Second, *identity narratives*, which relate to the identities and reputation of actors in international affairs, and which are in a constant process of negotiation and contestation. Finally, *issue narratives*, which strategically seek to shape the policy terrain and thus allow actors to pursue preferred policies and limit alternatives.

² Harry Truman's Inaugural Address, 20th January 1949. Retrieved from: https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr_archive/inagural20jan1949.htm

These various narratives are projected through international institutions, which in turn further contest, shape or adapt them. Development narratives have historically been informed and shaped by counter narratives and critiques from grassroots movements and within the international organisations informed by the narratives. That is, while the grand story of development may appear monolithic, there exist a multiplicity of micro-variations both across and within organisations, and these evolve over time. Finally, we approach development narratives not only with regard to their ideational dimensions, but also the material conditions that allow them to take root, and to initiate change in thought and action. Despite multifaceted interpretations of the development story, Singh (2018) notes that key organizations are all underpinned by Enlightenment and liberal beliefs in progress, eradicating poverty and providing a better future for humankind.

That is, the idea of development is grand in its symbolic dimensions, and although it is dynamic and evolving, the belief that development can be induced (and controlled) by global agencies has remained relatively constant and essential to its legitimacy.

(ii) Narrative Elements

Our analytical framework is inspired by the concept of *homo narrans*, which states that humans have a tendency to *communicate* and to *make sense of existence* through stories (Bruner 1990). While everyday narratives may be quite mundane, Miskimmon et al. (2013) identify strategic narratives as a communicative tool through which political actors attempt to give specific meaning to the past, present and future in pursuit of political objectives, integrating interests and goals to articulate end states as well as how to get there.

The focus on narrative complements an interest in discourse, with narrative viewed as a subset of discourse (Chatman 1978; Davis 2003) that organizes events into a sequence that is causally, temporally and rationally connected. Miskimmon et al. (2013) note that narratives are

crafted *out of* discourses and frames, which raconteurs plot in ways that can orient audiences to the future. Actors craft narratives based on the discourses available to them at a given time, are enabled or restricted by infrastructures, contingent events and perceptions of what will be acceptable to the intended audience. Narratives are of interest here precisely because they contain a transformation that is not a feature of discourse and frames (Miskimmon et al. 2013). In this respect, they are viewed as essential for motivating collective understanding and action in social movements, and also as a source of conflict and stalemates between and within movements (Davis 2003).

Narrative scholars tend to identify a common range of ‘narrative elements’, including *setting, actors, events, time* and *space*. *Actors* are central to the structure of narratives, characterized both by their own self-presentation through identity narratives and how others understand their character and ambitions, leading to the construction of reputation (Gabriel 2000; Miskimmon 2018). The *setting* presents an interpretation, or strategic portrayal, of the ‘world state’ through system narratives, in which they develop plausible but selective accounts of what is, and what they believe should be going on. Next *events*, which act as a catalyst for transformation, whereby given the setting, an event or action must take place which is unexpected, surprising or dangerous, demanding a response and framing key issues to define the policy terrain. Finally, narratives convey specific ideas about *space* and *time*, and in the case of international development, these tend to emphasise a ‘globalising horizon’ of action and a temporal dimension grounded in ideals of progress.

The OECD has an explicit policy orientation and policy narratives portray particular courses of action as made inevitable by the way the world is now (Fairclough 2003). This process of narrowing possibility is achieved through the development of a plot, whereby the choices become more and more limited until the final choice seems inevitable. Shanahan, Jones et al. (2011) claim that policy narratives *must* have a plot, and that such “plots serve to link the

characters to settings, assign the roles of the characters, and, most importantly, assign blame through some assertion of causation” (540). Stone (1988) identifies two basic policy narratives associated with measurement: that of *decline* and of *control*. International comparisons draw nations into a never-ending improvement journey (*recast as a story of hope*), while evidence of ‘what works’ (i.e. expert knowledge) supports the story of control. This twin story of hope and control is also central to the Enlightenment narrative of progress that infuses international development and the construction of knowledge in Western societies more generally.

(iii) Development as a cyclical tragicomedy in three acts

Our heuristic schema adopts a *theatrical turn* suggested by Rappleve (2012), who refers to the ‘scripting’ and ‘staging’ of reform agendas, which we extend to agenda-setting and international development through a synthetic process of emplotment. As Miskimmon et al. (2013) point out, strategic narrative entails an initial situation of order, a problem that disrupts the order, and a resolution that re-establishes the order or moves us towards to a new desirable state. This has parallels in Aristotle’s *fortunate* and *fatal* plots, and the twin themes of *comedy* and *tragedy*, in which the contrasting ends reflect the central protagonist’s capacity to respond to and resolve the plot’s central conflict (physical or psychic) (Booker 2007)

We thus present a tragicomic story in three acts and five overlapping stages as shown in Figure 1. Act 1, stage 1 introduces the *setting*, in which the narrators introduce a representation of how things are, and have been, as well as imaginaries of how things might or should be. This is developed in conjunction with stage 2; *the call*, which identifies an event or condition, framing it as a crisis-that demands an urgent response. PISA, for example, was developed within a setting that emphasised the imaginary of a hypercompetitive global knowledge economy, with outcomes on PISA positioned as a proxy for human capital, nurturing ‘the call’ to improve education outcomes relative to competitors.

Act 2 introduces *the path to salvation*, whereby in stage 3 blame is designated for the perceived crisis. This is accompanied in stage 4 by the provision of a corresponding solution. As Takayama (2010) notes, these related stages are generally premised on a simplified cause-effect relationship and familiar narrative pattern, with villains (malignant or benign) who caused the crisis, and heroes who will deliver the solution. Despite claims to having made education ‘more of a science’, OECD reports largely draw attention to “meaningful configurations” or what “successful systems do,” with the data adapted towards varying ends by networks of international and domestic actors (Auld and Morris 2016).

Act 3 is traditionally the denouement, whereby the story has been leading the protagonists in one of two directions, reflecting the fundamental themes of comedy and tragedy (Booker 2004). Either we accept the proposals, and it will end happily. Or reject, and it will end in some form of discomfiture, frustration or death. Although the SDGs do have a date for their denouement (2030), the development story is locked in a perennial cycle, and we thus refer to Act 3 as deferred denouement, at which point progress towards the idealised future will be measured and woven into the updated setting for Act 1 and a new story, formed and projected by elite actors.

[Insert Figure 1. here]

Below we use this schema as a heuristic to provide insight into the various narratives that shape and infuse the OECD’s new paradigm of development, situating these partial micronarratives within the cyclical story arc of international development. We follow Gabriel (2000), who comments, “stories [in organisations] hardly ever feature as integrated pieces of narrative with a full plot and a complete cast of characters; instead, they exist in a state of continuous flux,

fragments, allusions” (16). We locate and assemble these dynamic fragments, providing a brief summary of the narrative at the beginning of each Act.

Finally, recognising the diversity of meaning-making agendas, we adopt Wolf’s (2018) portrayal of imaginary worlds in literature, in which several narrative threads that follow the same trajectory can be understood as a braid, and a large number of narrative threads that crisscross can be represented as narrative fabric, resulting in an interwoven network of narrative moments (events) and divergent tellings that make up an imaginary world. Wolf connects the concept of narrative fabric to real-world events that involve large numbers of people, some which simply happen and in which people’s stories with divergent meanings and interpretations entwine (such as the fall of the Berlin Wall), but also instances in which there is a deliberate, or strategic construction of such fabric (such as concerted political or marketing campaigns).

III. A Development Story

Setting the Stage: The Millennium Development Goals

Singh’s (2018) analysis of interactions between international agencies identifies a key contested narrative as the interplay between economic and human development approaches. The UN’s MDGs aimed to bring together the international development community under eight goals, weaving contested strands of thinking together in a compromise between economic and human development approaches, creating a grand but synthetic narrative in which tensions were superficially resolved.

Singh (2018) highlights the role of UN summits that prepared the groundwork for the MDGs, which brought together a network of policy entrepreneurs and elite actors to promote the agenda's narrative. Although the OECD had been involved in agenda-setting, employees reflected that it did not have a sense of ownership over the MDGs (see Addey 2017). Entering the world of international development was central to the organisation's strategic mission, but despite its growing reputation for statistical expertise, PISA had been critiqued as unsuitable for less affluent contexts, while the UN-led agenda initially placed greater emphasis on expanding access and human development approaches.

The OECD initiated a series High-Level Fora on Aid Effectiveness between 2003-2011 (2003; 2005/2008; 2011a), playing a role in the *formation of the development narrative among elite actors*, but also allowing the OECD to refine its own identity narrative. During this period, the broad contours of the OECD's braiding of economic and human development narratives emerged in conversation with other agencies and stakeholders, finding articulation in its 'new paradigm for development' (OECD 2011b). Key narrative threads included a demand-led, country-based and participatory approach, emphasizing national ownership and government leadership. These reflected established development discourses that emerged in response to critiques and counter-narratives from the Global South.

The central narrative thread of the series, however, was the necessity of enhancing 'aid effectiveness'. Significantly, the high-level fora took place amidst growing concerns for accountability and effectiveness, as the development industry and national donors were under pressure to demonstrate tangible returns on aid. The *Paris Declaration* (OECD 2005/2008) sought to "improve the quality of aid and its impact on development," stating that partner countries and donors would work to enhance mutual accountability and transparency in their use of development resources, a move which was expected to strengthen public support for

national policies on development assistance. These ideas gained traction with the shock of the 2008 financial crisis.

The *Accra Agenda for Action* (OECD 2005/2008) noted that, “More than ever, citizens and taxpayers of all countries expect to see the tangible results of development efforts” (16). This view was widely acknowledged. Having sought to enhance its statistical legitimacy through its Global Monitoring Reports (Edwards et al. 2018), UNESCO (2015) reflected, “the assumption that global and regional conferences are powerful enough to hold countries and the international community to account has not proved to be valid” (xv). Outcomes-based disbursement, or ‘cash on delivery’ (Birdsall et al. 2010) was emerging as a new approach to foreign aid, and the World Bank (2015) voiced support for “the rise of results-based financing in education”.³

In 2011 the OECD initiated PISA for Development claiming it was a response to demand from developing nations and partner organisations (see Auld et al. 2019). Positioned as a ‘pilot project’, PISA-D’s stated objective was to adapt and enhance the relevance of the PISA instruments for less affluent nations, while maintaining the comparability of the findings with the PISA standard and thus allowing low- income nations to participate in future cycles under its Learning Framework 2030 (OECD 2018a). The OECD formed a strategic partnership with the World Bank in the early 2000s (Kallo 2009), and once the SDGs had been finalised this was extended to UNESCO and UIS, and a wide range of corporate and national aid agencies, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the PISA-D initiative (OECD 2017, 20).

Act 1: A ‘Learning Crisis’ and Humanitarian Assessment

Summary: We are living in a global age beset by serious challenges; environmental, economic, and social. Despite some progress under the MDGs, underdeveloped nations are failing to compete. Inferior schooling and governing systems have impeded the effectiveness of aid and nurtured a

³ Retrieved from:

https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Brief/Education/RBF_ResultsBasedFinancing_v9_web.pdf

'learning crisis'. International large-scale assessments provide a universal and comprehensive measure of education quality and should thus be provided to all children. By improving performance on these metrics, nations will both generate economic growth and enhance collective wellbeing. The international community and system leaders must thus respond to the call for humanitarian assessment.

The UN's SDGs followed the MDGs by weaving together the contested economic and human and development narratives. Education featured as goal number 4 and the specific targets for SDG4 were defined in the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO 2016), which stresses that over 1,600 participants had been involved in setting the targets, bringing diverse actors and their agendas into a common development experience and signifying *the projection of the development narrative onto states and societies*. Protagonists are reminded that the community were "far from having reached education for all," but the new agenda is based on "lessons learned", "remaining challenges" as well as "future priorities and strategies for its achievement" (6).

The setting for Act 1 of Education 2030 encompassed an array of diverse issues and actors, following the SDGs by positioning sustainability as its binding system narrative. SDG4 was defined as: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO 2016, 5). Unterhalter (2019) describes how the many meanings of 'quality' education considered during the early discussions for Education 2030 were narrowed in the process of defining indicators. The Declaration stressed "strengthening inputs, process and evaluation of outcomes to measure progress", and emphasised "efficient and effectively governed systems" (8). There was also alignment among key actors that improved *access* had not led to commensurate gains in education *quality*, with the 'learning crisis' becoming a defining issue narrative.

The humanitarian-moral necessity of assessment has been implicitly conveyed in OECD publications and media releases for some time, albeit in economic terms. Schleicher (2018) reminds governments of their responsibility to actively embrace reform, while warning that

“the cost of underperformance and underinvestment in education is rising” (207). The call for humanitarian assessment was voiced by a range of elite actors leading up to the SDGs, though most conspicuously by groups oriented towards assessment. The recommendations of the *Learning Metrics Task Force*, convened by UIS and Brookings Institution, state:

Measures for globally tracked indicators must be a public good, with tools, documentation and data made freely available. *No country should be precluded from measuring learning outcomes due to financial constraints. The task force recommends that donors and the private sector help eliminate cost barriers to assessment, especially in low- and middle-income countries.* Full documentation of studies that are funded with public resources should be made widely available to ensure the transparency and reproducibility of results. (LMTF 2013, 12-13 italics added)

Silvia Montoya, Director of UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), highlighted the specific needs of low- and middle-income countries:

To implement the new measurement agenda, countries need national and international statistical frameworks comprised of classifications, definitions and standards. They also urgently require tools, such as data quality assessments and mapping of education information systems, to improve the quality and coverage of their data. (UIS 2018)

Based on an initial aggregation of available data from ILSAs, UIS (2017) stated that “new data signal a tremendous waste of human potential that could threaten progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS)” (1). From this the moral imperative is identified:

The international community must not only make good on the longstanding promise to get all children in school but also ensure that they stay in school and learn, while completing an education that prepares them for decent employment and a fulfilling life in the 21st Century. (4)

The logic of humanitarian assessment is captured in the conclusion:

The discussions on benchmarks touch every major education issue. What are the minimum levels of learning we expect children to achieve? Should there be one benchmark for developing countries and another for developed countries? Or should they be defined at the country level? *Perhaps most importantly, do children and their households have the right or entitlement to a minimum level of learning?*

... *How can any government be expected to improve learning outcomes if they cannot assess the skills of their children?* This paper shows how countries can save millions of dollars by investing in learning assessments. But these savings pale in comparison to the individual and collective benefits arising if each of those 617 million children and adolescents were able to

meet and beat the minimum proficiency levels and *assume their right to a quality education*.
(UIS 2017, 21-22)

Central to the narrative was the moral assertion that children not only have a right to education, but it must also be *quality* education. From this follows *The Call* of humanitarian assessment, whereby it is a human right to be assessed, measured and compared. More significantly, it is framed as a moral duty for the development industry to carry out these assessments, to assist in interpretation and subsequent interventions, and to hold a nation's leaders accountable. Although UNESCO (2014) initially insisted that assessments of 'quality' should be country driven, UIS (2017) argued that it would not be practical or financially viable to develop new indicators or allow countries to set their own targets. While UIS intended to aggregate indicators from a range of sources, it sought to define basic minimum standards and used aspects of PISA in this initial process of reporting alongside other international and regional assessments. Whilst coalescing over the need for quality not all agencies shared the OECD's vision of how it should be measured. For example, despite its strategic partnership with the OECD, the World Bank (2018) has more recently advocated investment in national assessments.

The PISA-D pilot was essential for expanding the OECD's influence (Auld et al. 2020). The PISA-D International Seminar in 2019⁴ featured presentations by OECD analysts, contractors and technicians alongside political representatives from pilot nations and an endorsement from UIS's Silvio Montoya, each affirming the success of the project. With these endorsements, the OECD could present PISA and its Learning Framework 2030 as a major barometer of progress, bolstering its identity narrative and symbolising *the apparent acceptance of this narrative by global humanity and those affected by the narratives*. Rather than a 'PISA shock', the launch *event* served as a performative affirmation of the crisis

⁴ [The PISA-D International Seminar](#) was held in London on 25 September 2019.

narrative and the OECD's legitimacy, with Schleicher stating, "now everyone supports PISA-D." Participants were invited to partake in a story of hope, whereby *The Call* required them to demonstrate their 'political will' by participating in the improvement journey. The journey was expanded to align with the system narratives of the SDGs in the OECD's Learning Framework 2030.

The Learning Framework 2030 (OECD 2018) identified three main challenges at the centre of *the call* in its system narrative, the first was 'environmental', stating "climate change and the depletion of natural resources require urgent action and adaptation" (3). This was followed by invocations regarding "economic" and "social" challenges. The OECD (2018) stated that its Education 2030 agenda "contributes to the [UN SDGs], aiming to ensure the sustainability of people, profit, planet and peace, through partnership" (3). Although PISA-D focused on the cognitive dimensions assessed by PISA, the OECD (2016) indicated that its Learning Framework 2030 would "apply the SDG lens to the OECD's strategies and policy tools" (4). This was central to the OECD's evolving identity narrative, and the Learning Framework aimed to measure a wider variety of non-cognitive dimensions which were largely determined by the priorities established by the SDG's. (UNESCO 2016). Notable additions include social and emotional learning, global competence, creativity, and well-being, with 'collective well-being' situated at the apex of the framework.

Just as PISA had been positioned as a proxy for a nation's stock of human capital, the Learning Framework would place the abstract ideals defined by the SDGs within the framework of reality. In a report introducing its measure of global competence, Andreas Schleicher explained:

Goal 4, which commits to quality education for all, is intentionally not limited to foundation knowledge and skills such as literacy, mathematics and science, but places strong emphasis on learning to live together sustainably. But *such goals are only meaningful if they become visible.* (OECD 2018)

The more diffuse concept of global citizenship developed and promoted by UNESCO, which does not so easily translate into universal standards and measurement, was thus filtered through OECD policy tools and translated into the hierarchical language of quality as ‘global competence.’ Elsewhere (Auld and Morris 2019) we have illustrated how the framework began development prior to the SDGs and was influenced by emerging discourses within the USA, while its final form shifted to align with the SDG’s. While UNESCO’s stated aim was to empower learners to assume active roles in building a more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive societies, the OECD’s conceptual construct and central narrative thread, perhaps unsurprisingly, implicitly reframed global competencies as skills and knowledge that prepared students for economic success in a global labour market. In this way, the system narratives projected by the SDGs were internalized and gradually adapted to complement the OECD mission, bringing the issue onto more familiar policy terrain while adopting the more expansive identity narrative. This idea of global competence remained an important thread in the spatial dimension of the OECD’s issue narrative as it laid out the path to salvation.

Act 2. The Path to Salvation: Capacity Building and Privateers

Summary: The results of humanitarian assessment confirm the ‘learning crisis’ and nations must be guided on the path to salvation. Urgent action is required to build capacity by training local elites and ensuring alignment of local assessments with global standards. Expertise is provided by a global policy network who interpret data to designate blame and prescribe solutions, with a key role for the private sector. Blame for the ‘crisis’ is located within aspects of local systems, or actors, who are assisted by international experts but must exercise their agency to navigate the new global order.

Once the international development community accept the setting established in Act 1, responding to *The Call* and embarking on the improvement journey, the story of hope is brought into the realm of expert control. The OECD is on hand to guide nations onto the right path, providing access to a global community of experts along with associated seminars, workshops and media coverage, and publishing its data in a variety of formats to suit different

audiences, such as technicians, policymakers and the media. PISA-D country reports were developed predominantly by local experts under the stewardship of OECD analysts, yielding diverse and often contradictory policy lessons, and while the concern for quality and inclusivity remained the central thread, narratives were inflected by perceived conditions and priorities in the domestic settings and authorial interpretations (Auld et al. 2020).

The OECD Learning Framework 2030 and Learning Compass,⁵ however, aim to develop a global toolkit for reforming curricula and pedagogy, designating blame within school systems and offering solutions developed by international experts and explicitly tied to OECD indicators. Aspects of the system narrative are harnessed to promote this change, variously citing the need to “value common prosperity, sustainability and well-being,” and noting that “in an era characterised by a new explosion of scientific knowledge and a growing array of complex societal problems, it is appropriate that curricula should continue to evolve, perhaps in radical ways.” (OECD 2018, 3). In the context of this “increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world,” (3) the OECD further states that the Learning Compass metaphor was adopted to “emphasise the need for students to navigate by themselves through unfamiliar contexts,” emphasizing “agency” while arguably shifting blame for any failure onto the individual through the “reponsibilisation” of students and teachers (see Torrance 2016).

PISA-D also stressed the importance of enhancing assessment and monitoring systems, as well as technical expertise in developing nations. Singh (2018) argues that a key aim of such initiatives is to embed a new orthodoxy by training an elite cadre of technicians who are attracted to the narrative and press advice on political leadership in a ‘trickle up’ process (142). This process of conversion is conveyed under the banner of *capacity building*, which became prominent in the 1990s as an attempt to explain why technical solutions to certain development

⁵ Retrieved from: http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning-learning-compass-2030/in_brief_Learning_Compass.pdf

problems were not working, with the UN stating that it would be necessary to strengthen the human and organizational capacities of underdeveloped nations (West 2016). Capacity building has remained a central narrative thread within international development since that time, albeit oriented towards varying ideological ends, and was a key feature of PISA D (Addey 2017).

In fact, the *Rome Declaration* (OECD 2003) acknowledged that “the totality and wide variety of donor requirements and processes for preparing, delivering, and monitoring development assistance are generating unproductive transaction costs for, and *drawing down* the limited capacity of, partner countries” (10 italics added). There was also recognition in these high-level fora that the ambitious targets exceeded the capacity of traditional agencies to deliver them. The OECD (2011a) duly emphasised the need for “greater collaboration and knowledge sharing,” and highlighted their important role in “moving towards a global policy network”. The importance of this network broadly aligned with key partners within the international development community. Silvia Montoya (UIS 2018) argued that nations being targeted by the SDGs needed:

... to produce the robust data and evidence *needed by a wide range of national and international stakeholders to design, target and evaluate* policy interventions while charting progress towards the development goals. (UIS 2018, 11)

While issue narratives of quality and effectiveness delimit possibility for change by framing improvement with regard to prescribed indicators, actors with diverse agendas hitch onto the frame to develop micronarratives of salvation. OECD policy reports often advocate adapting forms of industrial benchmarking from business management, and this less rigorous conception of knowledge enhances its appeal as the lingua franca of a diffuse global network. Narratives promoting (or critiquing) conflicting diagnosis-prescriptions nonetheless interweave to reinforce the broader frame established in Act 1. In terms of key actors within this network, the issues of quality, effectiveness and accountability in education have generally been the

policy terrain of private organisations (Verger et al. 2017). The OECD (2011a) affirmed that, the “new approach will contribute to establishing a broader and more substantive partnership among all nations and private entities,” recognising “the central role of the private sector in advancing innovation, creating wealth, income and jobs, mobilising domestic resources and in turn contributing to poverty reduction” (OECD 2011b, 10).

Although the involvement of private organisations in development is not new, resistance to such partnerships is cast as a barrier to improvement and morally irresponsible (Schleicher 2018). While an overstretched development industry may rely on private organisations to pursue its goals, critics have highlighted how edu-businesses engaging in international development have pursued processes of *privatisation* while *profiteering* (Riep 2015, Mohammed and Morris 2019). Hitching onto the moral frame established by humanitarian assessment, *Privateers* operate under the authoritative banner of UN-sanctioned SDGs- a modern day letter of marque.⁶ Having successfully rebranded as philanthropic organisations (Ball 2012), corporations are cast in a heroic role within the post-2015 story. Much of the work required by ILSAs such as the OECD’s PISA is already outsourced to private organisations, who are actively interpreting ILSAs to diagnose problems-solutions, and then selling educational services to deliver the policies they have promoted.

Pearson’s, the world’s largest education business, work in literacy illustrates how narratives of corporate humanitarianism braid with the SDGs. One of a number of corporations involved in narrative formation for the SDGs, Pearson was awarded the contract to develop *PISA 2018 Student Assessment 21st Century Frameworks*⁷ and their technicians sit on the board of experts (see OECD 2018). One of the tasks Pearson undertook was to “Redefine reading

⁶ A ‘letter of marque’ was a government license in the Age of Sail that authorized a private person, known as a privateer or corsair, to attack and capture vessels of a nation at war with the issuer, absolving them from risk of being charged with piracy.

⁷ Retrieved from: <https://www.pearson.com/news-and-research/announcements/2014/12/pearson-to-develop-pisa-2018-student-assessment-21st-century-fra.html>

literacy, taking into account how young people are taught to approach the digital environment.” A parallel partnership unfolds in the form of the *UNESCO-Pearson Literacy Initiative*, which “aims to contribute to helping all youth and a substantial proportion of adults achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030 – a target of the new Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The ultimate goal is to identify policy lessons and hasten progress towards the SDGs, whereby:

... the UNESCO-Pearson Initiative will inform the work of digital solution providers, development partners and governments that strive for skills and literacy development as part of the global sustainable development agenda. (3)

The UNESCO-Pearson initiative falls under the umbrella of Project Literacy, a ‘global movement’ which was initiated in 2015 with the salvific goal of ending illiteracy by 2030. The result is published in *Guidelines for Digital Inclusion* (UNESCO 2018), which has the *UNESCO*, *Pearson*, and *Education 2030* logos on the title page, endorsing Pearson’s humanitarian branding.

In this way, *Privateers* hitch onto the frame established by the SDGs, drawing moral endorsement from UNESCO as a legitimating partner and statistical legitimacy from data generated to track progress on the goals. A key prescription running throughout *The Guidelines* (2018) is the need for AI in education (AIEd). AIEd and machine-oriented support are positioned as a necessary support for (poor) teachers, or as an efficient and effective replacement in case of shortages, aligning with Pearson’s stated commitment to integrating AI into its products to ‘automate education’.⁸ Elsewhere, a report commissioned by Pearson (Luckin et al. 2016) notes that AIEd and machine-learning offer the potential of real-time assessment, and claims that, “evidence about country performance will be available from AIEd analysis, calling into question the need for international testing such as PISA and TIMSS, at least in their current form” (48).

⁸ Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/parmyolson/2018/08/29/pearson-education-ai/>

Schleicher (2018) has acknowledged the promise of “intelligent digital learning systems” and “virtual laboratories”, suggesting that the OECD will be ready to adapt its narratives, assessments and policy tools to ensure its survival. Certainly, the OECD’s PISA4U and PISA4Schools are more amenable to the spatial and temporal horizons (see Lewis 2020) opened by digital governance in education and a post-causal world.

Act 3. Collective wellbeing and deferred denouement

Summary: Those nations who have followed the path to salvation through international assessments will address the learning crisis and provide their citizens with both quality education and the opportunity to work towards collective wellbeing in a sustainable future. A tragic fate awaits those who have not followed the path who will become part of a global underclass in an increasingly uncertain world. Before the vision is realised, new challenges will emerge, and a new vision will provide the basis for the formation of a new narrative.

In a well-crafted narrative the options have been narrowed to produce a sense of inevitability about proposed interventions. The development story broadly sets an end to poverty and the betterment of humankind as the collective goal. While the PISA story initially privileged economic growth, the idealized future is laid out in a ‘shared vision’ within the OECD’s (2018) Learning Framework 2030, stating that the organisation is “committed to helping every learner develop as a whole person, fulfil his or her potential and help shape a shared future built on the well-being of individuals, communities and the planet” (3). This is continued under the Learning Compass,⁹ which avers, “Even though there may be many different visions of the future we want, the well-being of society is a shared destination.” As with the concept of global competence, ‘well-being’ carries a (neo)liberal inflection, and an emphasis on the individual rather than the collective (Rappleye et al. 2020).

Drawing attention to PISA’s affective dimension within a wider narrative about the past, present and possible future, Landahl (2020) identifies its cyclical loop as a form of ‘temporal

⁹ Retrieved from: http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/learning-compass-2030/in_brief_Learning_Compass.pdf

governance'. This three-year cycle is situated within the broader arc of progress mapped out under the 2030 agenda, with disbursement-linked indicators serving a disciplinary function lest weary travellers should deviate from the path. Although global humanity never quite reaches an idealized state, the community is apt to insist that *at least things are better than they were before*. In the lead up to the Incheon Declaration, UNESCO (2014) reflected that although progress had been made under EFA, a new forward-looking agenda was necessitated by the wider changes in global circumstances. Similarly, the World Bank (2012) noted that “developing countries have made great strides towards the MDGs” (v) before unveiling its new strategy to combat the ‘learning crisis.’

The vision of an idealised future is never fixed or final and the micronarratives and norms that propel it are contested and re-negotiated, requiring actors to evolve and respond to emergent trends as they struggle to survive. Schleicher (2018) outlines changes to PISA under the Learning Framework 2030, whereby the assessment will “constantly evolve” rather than function as a “fixed point,” a decision that was taken to allow PISA to “lead education reform” by “measuring students on what they will need to thrive in the future” rather than “what was considered important some point in the past” (277). This is distinctive from PISA, in which the ideals of economic growth and cultivation of human capital were relatively static. While PISA will be positioned as a barometer of progress, Schleicher (2018) now emphasises a radically uncertain future posed by climate change and the digital transformation, resulting in the invocation that “against strong headwinds, we need to push ourselves even harder” (Schleicher 2018, 282). The idealised future dissipates, leaving only the ideal of progress, diligence and forward movement.

While the system narratives of a new agenda are yet in formation, the call for an encore to the never-ending story seems inevitable. The prospect of digital transformation led by the private sector appear likely to form key elements of that narrative.

IV. Conclusion: Losing the Plot

We set out to explore whether the portrayal of international development as a ‘great story’ might be used to conceptualize and interpret the OECD’s changing roles within a global governing complex. We understand international development as an essential node within this complex and central to the OECD’s mission, signified by its efforts to bring all nations into the same development trajectory through its new frameworks. We positioned the SDGs as a ‘great’ story in the symbolic sense, but also synthetic in that it drew various and often conflicting strands of development thought together, superficially relieving tensions within the community as it forged a unity of purpose. The scope of our analysis was limited to locating shifts in the OECD’s strategic narratives and frameworks as it sought to expand its influence within this space. This was pursued by situating a series of narrative elements within a heuristic story schema and tracing how OECD narratives and assessment frameworks evolved within a dynamic setting.

In Act 1, we explored the process of narrative formation, focusing on the series of high-level fora on aid effectiveness which informed PISA-D. Although the setting and system narratives projected by the SDGs accommodated a multiplicity of norms and agendas, the formation of the ‘learning crisis’ as a key issue narrative nurtured *the call* for humanitarian assessment. Despite differences in how quality should be measured, this aligned with a growing assessment regime and practical concerns for accountability in aid. UIS in particular was central to its legitimation, partnering with the OECD for PISA-D and endorsing the initiative. Hitching onto the issues and priorities established by the SDGs, the Learning Framework 2030 integrated non-cognitive domains, inserting a (neo)liberal economic inflection while positioning measurement as necessary to render the goals meaningful, implicitly establishing the policy terrain on statistical terms and delimiting alternative possibilities.

In Act 2 we set protagonists along the path to salvation, framing key issues while opening a multiplicity of micronarratives that designate blame within the system, identify villains and anoint heroes. Herein, the varying forms of expert knowledge used to initiate reform gain transformative power only in as far as wider system and issue narratives give them meaning. The Learning Framework 2030 and Learning Compass meet the imperative of change by developing a toolkit for global curricula and pedagogies tied to its assessments, and promote ambitious programmes of capacity building that aim to embed the narrative. Standardized data-of which PISA is only one source – is positioned as necessary to support a global policy network engaged in the search for solutions, each bringing their own outlooks and meaning-making agendas. We presented a brief illustration through Pearson’s heroic cameo, specifically its adaptation of the statistical material and humanitarian discourses in pursuit of its corporate goals, ones that are ultimately positioned as a challenge to the OECD’s assessment frameworks and policy expertise.

While the OECD formally sets collective wellbeing as the deferred denouement for Act 3, we note that this idealised future primarily serves a symbolic function. Moreover, the SDGs encompass a broad diversity of micro-norms and discourses, that are subject to ongoing struggles, diverse interpretations and re-negotiation as actors pursue divergent meaning-making agendas across and within organisations and over time. It was notable how the OECD’s early alignment and focus in Act 1 with promoting sustainability and protecting the environment largely disappeared as it was rearticulated within its frameworks, ultimately losing the plot.

Proposing a great story as a heuristic for understanding a ‘global complex’ leaves open the critique that we are imposing meaning to achieve artificial satisfaction. At the same time, attempts by international organisations to forge world order are a strategic and symbolic process that projects a form of order and corresponding meaning upon an otherwise disorderly

world. It is, in a sense, bound up with the (futile) imposition of structure. Our heuristic schema was developed in recognition of the fluidity of stories, the multiple and interrelated sites of resistance and (re)interpretation, and the varying ends that ostensibly similar stories may be mobilised to achieve. We nonetheless note that these divergent narratives and meanings crisscross and mesh with the material infrastructure of ILSAs, forming an interwoven narrative fabric of events, interpretations and tellings that make up the imaginary world of a global governing complex.

Although it was beyond the scope of our study, our analysis has provided insight into ways in which institutions and power are embedded in narrative schemes, in particular the role of strategic narratives as organisations work to establish their legitimacy in the context of a struggle for survival. We suggest the interest in narratives may be fruitfully extended in these areas, but also to explore storytelling and conflict within international organisations (see Gabriel 2000), how organisations amend narratives for different audiences, as well as the reception (acceptance, adaptation or rejection) of comparative data and associated narratives in an international media ecology, by scholars and political elites across societies and institutions. Amidst mounting critiques of development, we further suggest that attention to the cultural origins of the scripts we have inherited may also provide a basis for reflection and re-storying.

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