Theorising Policy Mobility

Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs) and new Policy Regimes in Education

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The main purpose of the lecture was to present a line of arguments that are currently in progress as part of a larger academic engagement with education policy in India. The talk focused on two broad questions: what are the ways in which the shifts in policy production in education can be understood? In particular, how do we make sense of the number and the volume of non-state actors in education? The second broad question focused on Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) and their influence on education policy in India.

Over the last few decades there has been an eruption of organisations that are part of what can be loosely called ‘education-action’. This includes a wide range of functions such as fundraising, curriculum development, teacher education, among others. A cursory look at the amount of intervention in education also sheds light on a fairly straightforward observation: Government schools are expected to be the spaces for reforms and interventions. They are also spaces where various types of interventions occur. It would be important to understand the growing interests of non-state organisations in education and their identification of the government system to be a system in
need of reform and change.

As we pay attention to the growing interest in education, we must understand that it is connected to generating a set of values and it has occurred as a result of the conditions that have been created for its existence. The growth of domestic NGOs is also connected to that of the IGOs. There seems to be an overlap of values, purposes, goals and methods between the NGOs and IGOs. The similarity of vocabulary, framing, articulation and the discursive production of educational needs has in part become possible because of the salience of transnational spaces of contact and interaction.

Given that broad generalisations and universals are part of the enterprise of education as well as policy knowledge production, the following three theoretical responses allow us to understand the transformation: First, as world culturalist theorists state, systems are becoming alike and hence the action in education can be understood as part of the emerging convergence. The other theoretical position foregrounds the different ways in which similar/same terminology is coded, employed and understood. The third, critical theoretical position on current education-action is that the convergence is in fact a manifestation of coercion and these changes carry an unmistakable deep imprint of neoliberalism.

Policy has always been identified with the state, in fact it has been an integral part of the making of a rational state. Policy making historically evolved around the need to address and contain social problems and unrest. Thus the approach would typically involve identification of the problem, setting up programmes and measures of relief and the assessment of these provisions. Of course, the field of policy process is much complex, dynamic that these linear, logical articulations. The 20th century saw an emergence of welfare capitalism and as a result a range of policies were drafted that viewed the state to be the primary provider. Government intervention was understood to be desirable and necessary. An increased expenditure on social programmes would lead to greater equality of opportunity and questions of equity were to be addressed through redistribution of resources. This nationalist development model underwent significant
changes in the 1980s with the debt crisis and an imposition of structural adjustment policies. The development world encountered the IGOs through these interventionist policies that in their first phase reoriented the nationalist strategies of development and later imposed what is commonly known as the Washington Consensus that involved fiscal discipline, tax reforms, trade liberalisation and greater privatization.

The first large-scale policy intervention in education occurred in India was District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), which began as a programme to improve primary education in 7 states and 42 districts, but soon got expanded to 270 districts and 18 states. The programme involved measures to boost enrollment, improve teaching and decentralize educational management. The programme identified district as a unit of engagement and introduced several new structures such as District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), Cluster Resource Center (CRC) and Block Resource Center. (BRC). DPEP was extended to a greater programme called ‘Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan’/Education for All mission. As centrally
sponsored mission, the SSA took on similar agendas of DPEP and closely developed along the lines of Education for All initiatives in several developing countries.

Another instance of a popular policy initiative driven by international actors is Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). PISA focuses on assessment of Mathematics, Reading and Science among students across the OECD member countries as well as partnering countries. The purpose of carrying out a large-scale, detailed assessment was to impact policy change in curriculum. While India decided to pull out of the assessment in the year 2012, an initiative called Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) was taken up in India that conducted assessments of Mathematics and Reading among students in the age group of 5-16.

By way of conclusion, the notion of mobility captures the movement, similarities and generation of educational policy discourse under global conditions. The notion of mobility allows for an examination of power structures among all the concerned actors, and enables seeing how states deploy the discourse of Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs) to suit their own agendas.

A number of questions were raised particularly of the predicaments of government schools, limits of the critique of system and questioning the binary between public and private schools.