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'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.'

Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks (1971: 276)

Abstract

As the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals approaches, a successor education framework is emerging under markedly different conditions from those in 2015. This paper conceptualises global education policy as a multi-scalar regime linking material interests, institutional architectures and knowledge projects, and analyses the post-2030 transition as a terrain of hegemonic struggle within an organic crisis of global capitalism. Proceeding retroductively from observable institutional developments, including expanding learning metrics, performance-based financing, platformised governance and contested curriculum authority, it identifies four competing knowledge projects, namely technocratic-digital optimisation, authoritarian-nationalist restoration, state-capitalist developmental coordination and liberal reformist repair, alongside counter-hegemonic projects centred on social, epistemic and environmental justice. Examining the consultation machinery now shaping the agenda beyond 2030, it argues that the settlement will crystallise through struggles over indicators, financing rules, and digital infrastructures, and identifies the conditions under which counter-hegemonic alternatives might achieve institutional anchoring.

Keywords: *post-2030 agenda; neo-Gramscian; policy regime; knowledge projects; organic crisis; global education governance*

Introduction

As the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals approaches, preparations for a successor framework are underway across multilateral institutions, regional bodies and national governments. Yet these discussions are unfolding under conditions markedly different from those that accompanied the adoption of SDG 4, the education goal, in 2015, including slowing economic growth and tightening fiscal constraints; persistent and often widening inequalities within and between countries (Piketty, 2014; Chancel et al., 2022); the erosion of US unipolar dominance and intensifying geopolitical rivalry; growing challenges to the normative foundations of multilateralism; accelerating digital transformation; and a deepening ecological crisis. None of these conditions is unprecedented in itself. Each is historically constituted, with roots reaching back through the neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s to the colonial organisation of the world economy. What distinguishes the present conjuncture is their conjunction in a context where the alignments on which the post-war education and development settlement rested are weakening simultaneously across domains. This is the condition named in the paper's epigraph, namely an interregnum in which the old is dying, the new cannot be born, and morbid symptoms multiply.

The paper advances two connected aims. The first is to conceptualise global education policy as a multi-scalar regime linking material interests, institutional architectures and knowledge projects. The second is to identify the generative mechanisms shaping the post-2030 conjuncture, namely the underlying configurations of interest, institutions and epistemic

authority whose interaction will determine which kind of settlement succeeds SDG 4. The central argument is that the emerging post-2030 education agenda should be understood not as a technical extension of SDG 4 but as a terrain of hegemonic struggle within an ongoing organic crisis of global capitalism. In this context, competing projects seek to rearticulate education under conditions of fiscal restraint, digital platformisation (the embedding of education governance in proprietary digital platforms) and poly-imperial rivalry, as defined below.

Since 1945, education has been central to a development settlement linking economic growth, political legitimacy and social integration to a Western-centric model of national development, rendered intelligible by human capital theory and administratively governable through indicators and targets (Hutchinson et al., 2023; Faul, 2025). The adoption of SDG 4 marked the most institutionally consolidated phase of this regime. However, institutional continuity has not ensured stability. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, fiscal austerity and sovereign debt have constrained public investment; labour market precarity has strained education's promise of social mobility; the ecological crisis has exposed the limits of growth-centred development; digital platformisation has redistributed power across scales; and geopolitical realignment has intensified competition within a fragmented imperial order. These developments suggest not temporary turbulence but ongoing dislocation across economic, political, epistemic and ecological spheres.

Debates over a successor framework are emerging amid this uncertainty. UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative and the Transforming Education Summit propose a new social contract for education (UNESCO, 2021c; United Nations, 2022); the World Bank and the Global Partnership for Education prioritise foundational learning and system strengthening (World Bank, 2019; GPE, 2020); the African Union aligns education with a long-term industrial and development vision (AUC, 2015; AU, 2025); nationalist governments contest the agenda's normative foundations, from gender language to the legitimacy of the SDGs (Education International, 2025; US Mission to the UN, 2025); and youth, teacher and civil society movements press for broader purposes and more inclusive agenda-setting (NORRAG, 2026). Meanwhile, the 2024 Pact for the Future and its annexed Global Digital Compact place connectivity and data governance at the heart of the development architecture (UN, 2024). These processes have yet to produce a coherent successor to the SDGs. They mark instead a pre-constitutional phase in which the infrastructural, fiscal and epistemic foundations of the next regime are being contested before formal goals are set.

The analysis proceeds retroductively, drawing on five observable institutional developments, ranging from the expansion of learning metrics to the politicisation of curriculum authority. The approach, the full list of observable developments and the sources used are set out below. The paper then traces the historical articulation of the regime from 1945 to 2015, analyses its disarticulation, examines the competing knowledge projects seeking to shape the post-2030 settlement, and considers how counter-hegemonic alternatives might achieve institutional anchoring. Throughout, the analysis is grounded in a normative commitment to social, epistemic and environmental justice (Tikly, 2019b). What is at stake is not merely the future of SDG 4 but the struggle to embed competing articulations of purpose, knowledge and power within the infrastructures that govern education across scales.

Conceptual framework

This paper conceptualises global education policy from a neo-Gramscian perspective. Neo-Gramscian scholarship in International Political Economy originates with Cox (1981; 1987), was consolidated as a distinct school through Gill (1993), received its most systematic exposition in

Bieler and Morton (2004), and has recently been applied to the crisis of the liberal international order (Babic, 2020). It extends Gramsci's analysis of hegemony from the national to the global scale. Three commitments define the approach. First, world orders are historically contingent alignments of material capabilities, institutions and ideas rather than given structures. Second, hegemony rests on consent as well as coercion. Dominant social forces universalise their interests through institutions and shared frameworks of meaning, so that a particular order appears natural. Third, theory is 'always for someone and for some purpose' (Cox, 1981: 128), making analysis of an order inseparable from the question of how it might be otherwise. Global education governance is therefore not a neutral terrain. It emerges from struggles over accumulation, legitimacy and authority. Education is not a passive recipient of these dynamics but a constitutive arena of hegemony, a domain in which economic strategies, political authority and dominant knowledge claims are institutionalised and reproduced.

A neo-Gramscian lens is not new to comparative education. Dale's (2000) analysis of global education agendas, Mundy's (1998) account of educational multilateralism, Robertson et al.'s analyses of hegemonic projects in international education development (Robertson et al., 2007), work on education and conflict (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008), and the author's analyses of Education for All as a regime of global governance and of education and justice in the postcolonial world (Tikly, 2017; 2019b) all draw on this tradition. The paper extends it in three ways, namely, applying it conjuncturally to the transition beyond 2030; developing the concept of knowledge projects; and situating both within an increasingly poly-imperial world order.

Within this perspective, the paper's object of analysis is the global education policy regime. Following Jessop (2016), a regime denotes a relatively stabilised configuration of material interests, institutional architectures and epistemic frameworks that structures policy over time. The term is used here to refer to something specific, namely the SDG 4-centred governance architecture comprising UNESCO, the World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, the OECD, bilateral donor agencies and philanthropic foundations, together with the financing modalities, benchmarking systems, professional norms and data infrastructures through which these organisations seek to influence national systems (Verger et al., 2018; Tikly, 2017). The regime operates across global, regional and national scales, and regional bodies occupy a distinct position within it. Organisations such as the African Union, the European Union and ASEAN are not constitutive of the global regime in the way that multilateral and financing institutions are; they mediate it, translating global frameworks into regional strategies and, at times, projecting regional priorities back into global negotiations. The African Union in particular mediates the regime from a position of aid dependence while projecting a developmental agenda of its own into the machinery it mediates.

The regime is also shaped by regime complexity (Orsini et al., 2013; Alter and Meunier, 2009). That is to say, it overlaps and interacts with adjacent regimes, so that framings, standards and financing rules originating elsewhere enter education governance and are taken up by education actors. The author's earlier analysis conceptualised Education for All as nested within a regime complex spanning the aid, MDG and SDG, human rights, trade and security regimes, and used the concept to trace the direction of influence between them (Tikly, 2017). The present paper extends that analysis in two respects. First, the most consequential adjacent arrangements are argued to have shifted since 2015. The regime complexes governing climate (Keohane and Victor, 2011), cyber and digital activity (Nye, 2014) and sovereign debt, each a loosely coupled set of norms and institutions rather than a single regime with settled rules, now set conditions for education that the aid and trade regimes once set. Second, organic crisis intensifies the interaction. The earlier analysis showed that influence within a regime complex runs from the regimes with greater compulsory power towards those with less (Tikly, 2017). Under organic

crisis that asymmetry widens. The institutions constituting the education regime lose the capacity to mediate external conditions, as aid contracts, membership is withdrawn and normative language is contested, while the debt, digital and climate complexes gain leverage over education budgets and infrastructures, so that the fiscal, digital and ecological conditions examined in the following section are set to a growing extent by arrangements over which education actors have increasingly constrained influence.

National governments are not passive recipients of the regime but differentially positioned actors within it, shaping global policy as well as being shaped by it, according to their power and positionality within the regime and the wider world order (Tikly, 2017; 2019b). They accordingly enter the analysis in two ways, as the objects of regime instruments and as authors of national strategies that are themselves moves within transnational knowledge projects. National developments therefore appear as illustrations of these projects rather than as country case studies, and the analysis ranges across phases of education rather than examining any one of them.

The regime's configurations of interest, institution and knowledge are embedded within historically constituted regimes of inequality, durable yet evolving and intersecting configurations of economic exploitation, geopolitical hierarchy and epistemic stratification through which privilege and precarity are distributed across populations and territories. The concept has been discussed at length elsewhere (Walby, 2009; Tikly, 2019b). Here it marks the structural level beneath the policy regime, the level whose patterns the regime works to stabilise and that the knowledge projects examined below contest or reproduce. It refers to the joint patterning of educational opportunity by class, race, gender, coloniality and exposure to environmental risk, which shapes who gains access, whose credentials count, whose languages carry status and whose knowledge holds authority (Tikly, 2004; 2019b).

Central to the analysis is the concept of articulation. Drawing on Gramsci (1971) and Hall (1986), articulation denotes the political and discursive work through which heterogeneous elements, including economic strategies, institutional forms and knowledge claims, are linked into provisional unities. Education has repeatedly served as a mediating site through which projects of accumulation are connected to promises of mobility, citizenship and development. Human capital theory, neoliberal competitiveness and rights-based and sustainability discourses have each rendered such linkages socially intelligible. Disarticulation occurs when these linkages weaken, and when economic outcomes, political authority and legitimating narratives cease to reinforce one another.

To conceptualise this weakening, the paper draws on Gramsci's notion of an organic crisis, namely a historically specific erosion of the alignment between economic structures, political authority and dominant ideas (Gramsci, 1971; Cox, 1987). Gramsci distinguished such crises from the merely conjunctural, the disturbances of everyday political life that pass without changing the system; an organic crisis challenges the fundamentals on which a social order is built (Babic, 2020: 772). Whereas the language of 'polycrisis' emphasises the interaction of multiple cascading shocks, organic crisis points to the more politically and historically specific disintegration of a hegemonic settlement linking accumulation, governance and knowledge. Gramscian scholarship in international political economy now attributes this condition to the liberal international order itself, hegemonic in the Gramscian sense because its ordering principles emanated from a US-centred historic bloc (Babic, 2020). This is the conjuncture described in the paper's epigraph (Gramsci, 1971: 276). Morbid symptoms, on this reading, are outgrowths of the dying order that can neither be managed within its limits nor constitute a viable successor to it (Babic, 2020: 773). Such a crisis arises not from a single contradiction moving mechanically towards rupture but from the cumulative misalignment of relatively

autonomous economic, political, cultural and environmental processes. The outcome is structured indeterminacy, a condition in which the existing order persists but its coherence can no longer be assumed. For this reason, organic crisis heightens the strategic importance of agency, opening what Gramsci termed a war of position, in which the trajectory of the post-2030 regime will depend on how actors mobilise competing projects within structural constraints.

These dynamics are historically structured by imperial expansion and colonial governance. The global education regime emerged within a world system organised through racialised hierarchies of labour, territory and knowledge. Decolonial scholarship describes the persistence of these hierarchies as the coloniality of power and knowledge (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Education systems have institutionalised Eurocentric epistemologies as universal standards while marginalising alternative knowledge systems and languages (Tikly, 2024a). Coloniality operates not as a residue but as a constitutive dimension of the regime itself, and its contemporary modalities are largely market-mediated. What Harvey (2003) terms the new imperialism (see also Tikly, 2004) works through financialisation, privatisation and accumulation by dispossession, rearticulating rather than replacing older colonial practices. Education is one terrain of this restructuring, from low-fee private schooling chains to venture capital in educational technology and the subordination of education budgets to debt servicing (Verger et al., 2016; Williamson, 2020; UNCTAD, 2024).

The present conjuncture is characterised not by a single imperial centre but by what the paper terms poly-imperialisms, namely multiple overlapping state-corporate formations that organise accumulation and project power within a system whose institutional architecture remains deeply shaped by the historical dominance of the United States and its allies (Harvey, 2003; Callinicos, 2009). An internally fractured Atlantic bloc, China's expanding development finance networks (Rolland, 2017), the European Union's regulatory standard-setting power (Bradford, 2020), Gulf sovereign wealth capital (Hanieh, 2018) and globally dominant technology corporations (Srnicsek, 2017) constitute overlapping centres of accumulation and power. The term denotes fragmentation within hegemony rather than a stable multipolar equilibrium. It matters for education because financing arrangements, curriculum reforms, benchmarking systems and digital infrastructures are increasingly embedded within the wider geopolitical and economic projects of these rival formations (Williamson and Hogan, 2020; Komljenovic, 2021).

Finally, the concept of knowledge projects, developed here, captures the epistemic dimension of struggles to interpret and govern education under conditions of organic crisis, and provides the organising lens for the analysis that follows. Knowledge projects are structured assemblages of ideas, metrics and institutional practices through which coalitions of actors define educational problems, legitimise particular visions of development and organise the instruments through which education systems are governed. Each project delimits what can credibly be said about education, by whom and with what authority, and each takes material form in indicators, standards, financing criteria, curriculum frameworks and digital infrastructures. Knowledge projects thus form the epistemic core of wider hegemonic formations, translating strategies of accumulation and rule into the categories through which education becomes intelligible and governable. Advanced by coalitions of international organisations, states, foundations, expert networks and corporations, they proliferate under organic crisis as rivals seek to reinterpret the sources of instability and propose pathways of rearticulation.

The three elements of the framework do distinct and complementary work: the neo-Gramscian core explains how a policy regime coheres and comes apart, decolonial scholarship specifies the epistemic and racialised dimension of hegemony that this tradition has under-theorised, and critical realism, introduced in the discussion of method below, supplies the inferential procedure for identifying underlying formations from observable developments. Together they allow the

analysis to move between structural regimes of inequality, the institutional policy regime that stabilises them, and the knowledge projects through which educational problems are defined and governed. In these terms, the five observable developments from which the method begins are the instrument-level traces within education governance of the accumulation strategies described above, from the new imperialism to its poly-imperial bearers. Organic crisis destabilises alignments across all three levels, generating the competing and uneven attempts at rearticulation examined below.

Analytical approach and sources

The argument that follows is conceptual and documentary. It rests on two bodies of material, namely, the policy and strategy documents of the institutions identified above as constituting the regime, including UNESCO and its Global Education Monitoring Reports, the World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, the OECD and the outcome documents of United Nations summits, published principally between 2015 and 2026, supplemented by the regional strategies through which bodies such as the African Union mediate these frameworks; and the secondary scholarship on global education governance cited throughout. The African Union is treated as the principal regional case, with the European Union and ASEAN noted comparatively, reflecting Sub-Saharan Africa's centrality to the SDG 4 agenda and the sharpness of its financing constraints. Documents were selected not through systematic review but because they are the authoritative public statements of the organisations that constitute the regime, the places where problem definitions, targets and financing rules are formally codified.

The mode of inference used in the paper is retroduction. The procedure, supplied by critical realism, involves moving from observed phenomena to the conditions and mechanisms that must be in place for those phenomena to take the form they do (Bhaskar, 2008; Danermark et al., 2002). The analysis begins from five observable institutional developments: the expansion and embedding of learning metrics across global, regional and national governance; the growth of performance-based financing; the platformisation of governance infrastructures; the politicisation of curriculum authority; and the strategic alignment of education with industrial policy. These were selected because each marks a transformation in the instruments through which education is governed, rather than in provision, workforce or operating conditions, and each is documented independently in the corpus and the secondary literature. Readers of the critical literature may expect other contemporary, observable phenomena, such as privatisation, the deprofessionalisation of teaching, or the growing significance of education in emergencies, to feature among these starting points. They are omitted because they are understood here as changes in the provision of education and in the conditions surrounding it, rather than as changes in governing instruments themselves. Such phenomena enter the analysis only where they assume governance form, as privatisation does through performance-based financing and platformisation. The analysis then asks what configurations of material interest, institutional arrangement and epistemic authority would have to exist to generate these five developments. These configurations are what the paper names knowledge projects. The set of observables is corrigible, and the claim is one of sufficiency rather than exhaustiveness.

The projects identified below were derived by clustering the observable developments along four dimensions: the diagnosis of crisis each embodies; the locus of epistemic authority it asserts; the policy instruments through which it operates; and the coalition of actors advancing it. A formation was included as a distinct project where all four dimensions could be identified and attached to a documentary footprint. Candidates failing this test were treated in one of two ways. Those whose elements operate within an included project were absorbed into it, as transnational religious conservatism is within authoritarian-nationalist restoration. Counter-

hegemonic formations, including decolonial, feminist, Indigenous, ecological and degrowth currents, share a diagnosis of crisis but not yet the coalition density and instrument-building of the four hegemonic projects, and are therefore analysed collectively, an asymmetry of treatment that registers a real asymmetry of institutionalisation. The term "counter-hegemonic" is used in Gramsci's sense rather than as shorthand for any opposition to the liberal order. Authoritarian-nationalist restoration also contests that order, yet it does so by seeking to reorganise consent around a settlement that recodes regimes of inequality rather than dismantling them, while appropriating the market and digital instruments of the very order it opposes. It is on these grounds, not on the fact of opposition itself, that the project should be read as rival hegemonic rather than counter-hegemonic. What distinguishes the two is the relationship to regimes of inequality, not the target being contested.

Of the five observables, three (metrics, performance-based financing, platformisation) point to the first project identified below, one (curriculum authority) to the second, and one (industrial alignment) to the third. The fourth, liberal reformist repair, is considered differently, as the incumbent settlement that the others contest, recognisable by the governance processes it currently co-ordinates rather than by distinctive observables of its own. Table 1, presented alongside the discussion of the projects below, summarises the result. It sets out the four hegemonic projects and the counter-hegemonic family in the post-2030 conjuncture and compares them on the diagnosis of crisis each advances, the locus of epistemic authority to which each appeals, the characteristic instruments through which each is pursued, and the exemplary documents in which each leaves a documentary footprint; the coalitions advancing each project are set out in Table 2. The projects are ideal-typical constructs rather than actors' self-descriptions. Actual institutions combine elements of more than one, and the typology claims analytical rather than exhaustive status. The unit of analysis throughout is the project, not the organisation. National and regional developments are cited as instantiations of transnational projects, not as cases in their own right. For the authoritarian-nationalist project especially, national assertion is the characteristic mode of intervention in the global regime. Throughout the paper, claims about documented institutional developments are referenced to primary or secondary sources, while claims about the significance of those developments for the regime are interpretive and are signalled as such.

The emerging post-2030 process

Before turning to how the present conjuncture was historically produced, it is worth setting out what formally exists of the post-2030 agenda, since the observable developments on which this paper focuses are concentrated there. No intergovernmental negotiations on a successor framework have begun. The Pact for the Future commits the 2027 SDG Summit to considering how to advance development beyond 2030 (UN, 2024). Within education, the SDG 4 High-Level Steering Committee, the apex body of global education cooperation hosted by UNESCO and comprising member states, regional and multilateral organisations, and constituency seats for civil society, youth, teachers, donors and foundations, mandated a three-phase consultation on the agenda beyond 2030 in August 2025. A foresight exercise and global youth survey were implemented during 2026; regional, national and stakeholder consultations will be launched from the 2027 Global Education Meeting in Bangkok; and a consolidated education framework is to be synthesised by the end of 2028, so that an agreed education framework is in hand when formal negotiation of the successor to the 2030 Agenda, expected to follow the 2027 SDG Summit, begins (UNESCO, 2025a; 2026a). The process is thus consultative and executive rather than intergovernmental, and it unfolds as aid to education contracts sharply and as US withdrawal from UNESCO takes effect. It is this combination, an agenda being designed before

any mandate to negotiate it exists, under sharply deteriorating material conditions, that the paper's framework sets out to explain.

The historical articulation of the liberal and neoliberal education regime, 1945 to 2015

The contemporary crisis can only be understood in relation to the historical articulation of the liberal and later neoliberal education and development regime. Since 1945, education has repeatedly been reconnected to shifting projects of accumulation, state formation and geopolitical ordering, and the trajectory sketched here can be read as successive attempts to stabilise particular articulations of accumulation, governance and educational purpose within changing world orders.

In the post-war decades, education was central to reconstruction in the West and to nation-building in newly independent states. Mass public education was aligned with Keynesian growth strategies, welfare expansion and democratic citizenship (Green, 1997), while international human rights frameworks institutionalised education as a universal entitlement. Human capital theory increasingly reframed this settlement in economic terms (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964), with rights and human capital rationales articulated within a single developmental compact. The independence of formerly colonised countries reshaped but did not dismantle global hierarchies. Rapid educational expansion signified modern nationhood, yet dependence on external finance, expertise and curricular models reproduced the centre-periphery asymmetries of a world economy still structured by colonial legacies (Altbach and Kelly, 1978; Robertson et al., 2007; Tikly, 2004).

The economic crises of the 1970s destabilised this settlement. From the early 1980s, structural adjustment programmes promoted fiscal austerity, trade liberalisation and state retrenchment (Samoff, 1994), while the World Bank assumed a more directive role in education policy, advancing rate-of-return analysis and prioritising basic education as the most efficient public investment (Psacharopoulos, 1990). Schooling was redefined as individual investment in human capital rather than collective entitlement, and governance shifted towards performance measurement and cost-efficiency, embedding education more deeply within global circuits of accumulation (Robertson et al., 2007; Harvey, 2003).

By the mid-1990s, the social costs of adjustment prompted recalibration rather than rupture. The post-Washington Consensus added institutional reform and poverty reduction while maintaining market-oriented principles (Stiglitz, 1998), and the Education for All movement, from Jomtien to Dakar, sought to restore legitimacy through renewed commitments to universal access and gender parity (UNESCO, 1990; World Education Forum, 2000; Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005). Social investment discourse coexisted with imperatives of competitiveness and efficiency (Tikly, 2017). Enrolment expanded significantly, particularly at primary level, but quality disparities and global inequalities in progression persisted.

The global financial crisis of 2008 marked a further inflection point. Austerity and renewed debt pressures constrained expenditure just as concern intensified that expanded enrolment had not translated into measurable learning. A discourse of global 'learning crisis', examined in the next section, began to reframe educational challenges as deficits in foundational skills; international assessments assumed greater prominence, governance increasingly operated through metrics and benchmarking, and expanding digital administration laid the groundwork for subsequent platformisation. The adoption of SDG 4 in 2015 represented both consolidation and strain, an expansive normative vision marking the regime's highest point of institutional density,

articulated just as slowing growth, rising inequality, climate emergency and geopolitical rivalry were weakening the foundations of the multilateral consensus.

Across these phases, each rearticulation displaced certain tensions while generating new contradictions. Post-war developmentalism expanded access while reproducing colonial hierarchies; neoliberal restructuring restored macroeconomic discipline while commodifying provision and exacerbating inequalities; post-Washington recalibration softened the costs of adjustment without transforming the architecture of inequality; and technocratic consolidation strengthened performance management while narrowing educational purpose to the measurable. This weakening of the regime was reflected in its institutions. Aid to education stagnated from the mid-2010s (UNESCO, 2025); the SDG 4 Scorecard found most countries off track against their national benchmarks (UNESCO and UNESCO-UIS, 2023); language on gender and citizenship grew more contested in multilateral negotiations; and the United States announced withdrawal from UNESCO in 2017 and again in 2025 (US Department of State, 2025). The post-2030 agenda therefore emerges not in continuity with a stable settlement but within a conjuncture in which the historical articulation of the regime is under sustained pressure.

Organic crisis and the recalibration of global education governance

The global financial crisis of 2008 did not produce an immediate rupture in the neoliberal education regime. Rather, it registered as a conjunctural shock. This section argues that it nonetheless initiated a prolonged process of disarticulation across economic, political, geopolitical and environmental domains. This interpretation is developed from the evidence on financing, governance and epistemic authority that follows (Piketty, 2014; UNCTAD, 2022). In the terms set out above, the period is best understood as an organic crisis, a gradual weakening of the alignment linking accumulation, political legitimacy and dominant knowledge frameworks, unfolding through institutional recalibrations and emerging contradictions rather than a single moment of breakdown.

At the economic level, structural fragilities within financialised capitalism have constrained the regime's material foundations. Recovery after 2008 was uneven, marked by stagnant productivity growth and widening inequality (Piketty, 2014; Harvey, 2011). In low- and middle-income countries, rising public debt through the 2010s, compounded by the fiscal shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic, sharply constrained fiscal space (UNCTAD, 2022; IMF, 2023). In an increasing number of countries, interest payments on public debt now exceed spending on education or health; over 3.3 billion people live in states where this is so (UNCTAD, 2024). Meanwhile, government education spending has stagnated overall and fallen in real terms in many poorer countries. Around forty per cent of low- and lower-middle-income countries cut education budgets in 2020, by an average of 13.5 per cent in real terms, and education's share of budgets in these countries remains below pre-pandemic levels (World Bank et al., 2022).

These domestic pressures have been compounded by shifts in the global aid architecture. Although Official Development Assistance reached record nominal levels in 2022, much of the increase reflected support to Ukraine and in-donor refugee costs rather than sustained investment in national education systems. Direct aid to education has remained broadly constant since 2016 and is now contracting. It fell by 8 per cent in 2024 and is projected to decline by around 30 per cent between 2023 and 2027, while education's share of total aid dropped to 7.5 per cent in 2024, its lowest level since 2010 (UNESCO, 2026b). The expansion of blended finance arguably exposes education systems to new forms of indebtedness and volatility. Under these conditions, the human capital articulation has further weakened, as

constrained public investment and precarious labour markets undermine the promise that schooling secures upward mobility.

Renewed debates over reform of the global financial architecture, which culminated in the 2025 Sevilla financing for development conference, reflect growing recognition that the financing architecture underpinning the SDGs is structurally constrained (UNCTAD, 2022; Stiglitz et al., 2009; UN, 2024). Yet these discussions remain embedded within financialised global capitalism. Sovereign debt regimes, capital market discipline and credit-rating architectures continue to delimit national fiscal autonomy, particularly across the Global South (UNCTAD, 2022); education budgets are increasingly subordinated to debt servicing; and loan-based and blended instruments draw social sectors more deeply into circuits of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2011; UNCTAD, 2024). Without mechanisms to expand concessional finance and restructure unsustainable debt, new goal frameworks risk reproducing the gap between normative ambition and material capacity (UNCTAD, 2022).

It was in this context that the discourse of a global 'learning crisis', given authoritative form in the 2013/4 Education for All Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2014), was consolidated and sharpened. The World Bank's World Development Report on education (World Bank, 2018) placed learning at the centre of the development agenda, and the Bank's subsequent framing of 'learning poverty' (World Bank, 2019) recast crisis as measurable deficit in foundational skills. This reframing represented an attempt at rearticulation. If economic growth and employment outcomes were uncertain, measurable learning outcomes could serve as a renewed anchor linking education to development, with performance metrics, structured pedagogy and digital interventions presented as scalable solutions capable of restoring system effectiveness under fiscal constraint.

Yet this epistemic shift narrowed the field of intelligibility. As Sriprakash et al. (2019) argue, the learning crisis functions as a racial project, bracketing the structural and historical production of racial domination that shapes education systems. Colonial legacies, racialised dispossession and the unequal valuation of human life are displaced from analysis, and crisis becomes a matter of system inefficiency rather than a symptom of a racialised political economy. The logic extends beyond race. Class inequality is reframed as household poverty, gender disparities as participation gaps, ethnicity and disability as statistical categories detached from histories of exclusion. Inequality is rendered measurable and comparable but stripped of structural and political content; in neo-Gramscian terms, systemic contradictions are translated into managerial challenges, and the regimes of inequality identified above disappear from view at the very moment their effects are being measured.

Political fragmentation has further destabilised the regime. The post-2008 period has seen declining trust in technocratic governance, scepticism towards multilateral institutions and the rise of populist and ethno-nationalist movements (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Zürn, 2018). Education has become an increasingly politicised arena in which disputes over national identity, historical memory and cultural authority are fought out. Multilateral commitments to inclusion and global cooperation now coexist uneasily with domestic political projects emphasising sovereignty and cultural homogeneity, indicating deeper struggles over epistemic authority and the normative foundations of the liberal settlement.

Geopolitical realignment further complicates global education governance. The relative rise of China and the growing assertiveness of the expanding BRICS grouping have contributed to a more multipolar order characterised by competition over the institutional architecture of development. Chinese state-linked initiatives integrate education reform within broader industrial and connectivity strategies, most visibly through the technical training, scholarship

and higher education components of the Belt and Road Initiative (King, 2014a; Rolland, 2017). Across the wider BRICS grouping, the picture is more uneven, but the New Development Bank and expanding intra-BRICS higher education and research partnerships embed skills development and research cooperation within strategic development agendas. At the same time, United States and European technology firms consolidated their influence through cloud services, learning management systems and data infrastructures, embedding themselves within national education systems during the pandemic (Williamson, 2020; Williamson and Hogan, 2020). Control over technological standards and proprietary data infrastructures has consequently become an important source of influence in the governance of education systems (Komljenovic, 2021).

The formal embedding of digital governance within the 2024 Pact for the Future and its annexed Global Digital Compact (UN, 2024) consolidates this infrastructural turn. Connectivity, artificial intelligence and data governance are no longer framed as enabling tools but as constitutive dimensions of the development architecture, yet the standards through which commitments are operationalised remain shaped by competing state-corporate formations. Digital governance thus functions simultaneously as a mechanism of coordination, a frontier of accumulation and a terrain of poly-imperial competition.

Coercive power remains intertwined with these processes. Hegemony rests on force as well as consent, and under organic crisis the balance shifts towards force. In this regard, the number of active state-based conflicts has risen almost continuously since the early 2010s to a post-1946 record, with interstate war intensifying and battle deaths in 2025 at their highest level since 1994 (Davies, Pettersson and Öberg, 2026). World military expenditure has grown for eleven consecutive years and now absorbs almost 7 per cent of all government spending (SIPRI, 2026). Further, the use of sanctions, especially financial sanctions, has expanded markedly since the mid-2000s (Felbermayr et al., 2020). Armed conflict, sanctions and geopolitical rivalry thus increasingly set the fiscal priorities and governance conditions under which the regime reaches national systems, as rearmament competes with social expenditure and donors reallocate aid towards defence. Two cases show this in different ways. The devastation of Gaza, widely described as scholasticide for the systematic destruction of schools, universities, archives and cultural infrastructure alongside the killing of educators and students (Desai et al., 2025; 2026; Giroux, 2025; Hajir and Qato, 2025; Junina, 2025), is coercion exercised from within the order, by Israel, a state armed and diplomatically shielded by its hegemon. Here, education itself is the object of violence, and the multilateral institutions that codify the right to education have proved unable to protect it. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is coercion by a challenger to the order, and it bears on the regime through its fiscal effects, absorbing a share of the record aid of 2022 that reshaped the financing conditions described above. In both, economic and technological dominance coexists with the persistent possibility of violent enforcement. The burden falls disproportionately on populations in the Global South, where protracted conflict, as in South Sudan, and the humanitarian architecture that responds to it reinforce displacement and dependency and divert public resources from long-term social investment (Novelli and Kutan, 2024).

The deepening existential threat posed by the effects of climate change, the pollution of land, seas and rivers linked to extractive technologies and the threat of biosphere collapse strains the regime along a different axis, exposing the contradiction between its growth-centred rationale and the ecological limits of growth (Raworth, 2017). Climate-related disasters intensified during the 2010s and early 2020s, further burdening already fragile education systems. Education for Sustainable Development is formally embedded in SDG 4.7 and in UNESCO's ESD for 2030 agenda, yet implementation remains uneven and often instrumental (UNESCO, 2021a; 2023a).

Sustainability is invoked rhetorically, while curricula continue to prioritise growth-oriented paradigms. Environmental education is frequently subordinated to prevailing economic orthodoxies (Jickling and Wals, 2008), and standardised assessment regimes marginalise local ecological knowledge and alternative epistemologies (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2017).

Competing knowledge projects and the rearticulation of the post-2030 agenda

The post-2030 agenda is crystallising around competing attempts to define and stabilise the present conjuncture, and the definition of the crisis is itself a central component of each. For some actors, the SDGs' underperformance signals measurable deficits in foundational learning that improved metrics and results-based instruments can correct (World Bank, 2018; GPE, 2020). For others, the crisis is one of cultural displacement by liberal, cosmopolitan expertise, and sovereignty and civilisational identity are the organising principles of a renewed settlement, a stance reflected in analyses of the emerging post-Western order (Acharya, 2014; Callinicos, 2009). For others still, the deficit is one of strategic capacity to link education, research and production, to be addressed through planning and industrial policy (AUC, 2015; AU, 2025). A fourth reading treats the SDGs' underperformance as a failure of implementation, financing and global solidarity that renewed multilateral commitment can repair (UNESCO, 2021c; UN, 2024). A fifth locates the crisis in historically entrenched regimes of inequality and coloniality that the existing settlement has reproduced rather than redressed.

Cutting across these diagnoses is a framing that originates in adjacent regimes and increasingly conditions education governance, namely the claim, advanced by the IPCC (2023) and UNDP (2022), that climate disruption, technological transformation and deepening inequality together demand a systemic transition rather than sectoral adjustment, and that the transition must be a just one. It is an instance of the regime complexity noted above rather than a knowledge project in the sense defined there, a resource on which every project draws, invoked to justify technocratic optimisation and multilateral repair as readily as developmental planning or decolonial change. The projects diverge over what a just transition would require of education and whom it should serve. For some it denotes compensation for those displaced by decarbonisation and automation (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013), for others a claim on historical responsibility and the redistribution of resources and epistemic authority (Swilling and Anneck, 2012). These diagnoses and framings are not neutral descriptions but hegemonic interventions, each specifying which institutions are authorised to act, which forms of expertise count and which futures appear feasible. It is through them that struggles over interpretation take institutional form as knowledge projects, each rooted in a distinct configuration of power and material interest and each seeking to secure consent for a particular trajectory of global education governance. No single bloc commands uncontested authority.

These projects are not mutually exclusive. Actors position themselves within and across projects. For example, the Global Partnership for Education combines liberal reformist commitments with technocratic instruments; the African Union articulates developmental coordination while mediating the SDG 4 framework regionally, and it sits within the Steering Committee machinery while formally endorsing cooperation within the Global Development Initiative framework; teacher unions defend the multilateral settlement in some arenas while contesting privatisation and metric governance in others. Such straddling is not a weakness of the typology but evidence of the hegemonic struggle it is designed to capture; articulation proceeds as actors combine and recombine elements of rival projects. Table 1 summarises the four projects and the counter-hegemonic family examined below.

Table 1. Knowledge projects in the post-2030 conjuncture: crisis diagnosis, epistemic authority, instruments and documentary footprint.

Knowledge project	Diagnosis of crisis	Locus of epistemic authority	Characteristic instruments	Exemplary documents
Technocratic-digital optimisation	System underperformance; measurable deficits in foundational learning	Quantification and computational expertise	International large-scale assessments; learning metrics and learning poverty; results-based financing; platform data infrastructures	WDR 2018; Ending Learning Poverty (2019); SDG 4 indicator framework
Authoritarian-nationalist restoration	Cultural displacement and epistemic capture by liberal, cosmopolitan expertise	National will and civilisational tradition	Curriculum revision; textbook control; restrictions on teaching content; political oversight of educators	Indian NCF and NCERT revisions; US state legislation
State-capitalist developmental coordination	Deficit of strategic capacity linking education, research and production	Planning expertise embedded in state institutions	Skills and industrial policy alignment; education components of infrastructure corridors; STEM and research investment	CESA 2026 to 2035; Agenda 2063; BRI education frameworks
Liberal reformist repair	Failure of implementation, financing and global solidarity	Multilateral expertise and rights-based frameworks	Normative frameworks and summits; equity commitments; monitoring and reporting architectures	Futures of Education (2021); TES (2022); Pact for the Future (2024)
Counter-hegemonic projects	Historically entrenched regimes of inequality and coloniality	Epistemic justice; plural and relational knowledges	Open educational resources; Indigenous knowledge validation; debt justice; curriculum decolonisation; South-South research networks	Africa Charter; debt justice and OER declarations

A first project is technocratic-digital optimisation. The crisis is interpreted not as structural disarticulation but as a problem of system performance, to be addressed through enhanced measurement, data infrastructures, algorithmic calibration and comparative evaluation; epistemic legitimacy rests on quantification and computational expertise. The trajectory is already visible in the extension of international large-scale assessment into a growing number of middle- and low-income contexts (Crossley, 2014), in the consolidation of learning poverty and the SDG 4 indicator architecture as the primary objects of policy intervention (World Bank, 2018; 2019), and in the tightening of funding and reputational standing to measurable performance (Verger et al., 2018). Digital infrastructures are central to the project. Platform-based systems link ministries and schools to proprietary data ecosystems; algorithmic tools classify and rank institutions, teachers and students; and venture capital and philanthropy promote EdTech as both a social solution and a frontier of growth (Williamson and Hogan, 2020; Komljenovic, 2021; West, 2023). The project advances identifiable interests. International organisations, philanthropic foundations, technology firms and policy elites derive authority from the expansion of evidence-based governance, while metric intensification consolidates standard-setting power and data infrastructures generate rents. By reframing structural

tensions as technical implementation challenges, technocratic-digital optimisation stabilises the regime without altering its orientation towards growth; inequality is recast as a performance gap, and coherence is sought through intensified expertise and infrastructural integration rather than through political renegotiation.

A second project is authoritarian-nationalist restoration. While the first project intensifies and technologises expert authority, this one attacks it. At its core lies an epistemic strategy of delegitimising liberal, cosmopolitan and technocratic expertise and reconstituting knowledge authority as an expression of national will. Under conditions of organic crisis, this project reframes the source of instability not as structural inequality but as cultural displacement and epistemic capture. Appeals to 'fake news', denunciations of 'woke' ideology and scepticism towards universities and multilateral bodies discredit alternative epistemic communities; the target is not particular curricular content but the institutional authority of experts themselves. Education becomes a privileged terrain for this reordering. In India, curricular revisions have aligned historical narratives more closely with Hindu nationalist perspectives, reframing accounts of Mughal rule, caste oppression and communal violence, and reinterpreting constitutional secularism within majoritarian understandings of national identity (Batra, 2020; Anand and Lall, 2022). In parts of the United States and Europe, legislative and policy initiatives have restricted the teaching of systemic racism, gender identity and colonial history, curtailed diversity programmes and portrayed educators as politically biased. To redefine what counts as legitimate knowledge is to redefine who belongs to the nation (Apple, 2006; Giroux, 2023). These dynamics increasingly reverberate within multilateral arenas. Negotiations over language relating to gender equality, sexuality and citizenship in UNESCO and United Nations forums have become more polarised (Education International, 2025), and multilateralism is reframed as a terrain of ideological contest, with implications for the coherence of any post-2030 normative settlement. The project serves identifiable political and material interests. Coalitions linking political leadership, nationalist intellectual networks, media ecosystems and state-aligned economic actors stabilise their rule by recoding structural inequality as cultural conflict. Nor does the project reject market mechanisms, digital infrastructures or international capital; it appropriates them where they reinforce strategic objectives, asserting sovereignty epistemically as well as territorially. Authoritarian-nationalist restoration thus represents not institutional breakdown but a structured attempt at rearticulation, restoring coherence by redefining legitimacy while intensifying polarisation. It is also the conjuncture's clearest morbid symptom, an outgrowth of the dying settlement's failures that cannot be managed within the old framework yet offers no hegemonically viable successor.

A third project is state-capitalist developmental coordination. In contrast to technocratic optimisation, which privileges transnational benchmarking, and authoritarian restoration, which centres on cultural sovereignty, this project seeks to reconnect education to long-term industrial strategy and technological upgrading. Crisis is understood as a deficit of strategic capacity and insufficient coordination among education systems, research institutions and productive sectors. Epistemic authority rests on planning expertise embedded within state institutions, and universities, vocational colleges and research centres are integrated into national innovation systems in sectors deemed critical for future competitiveness (King, 2014a; 2020; Rolland, 2017). The orientation is evident in the educational components of the Belt and Road Initiative, in the Continental Education Strategy for Africa's alignment of skills development, STEM expansion and research capacity with the industrial transformation objectives of Agenda 2063 (AU, 2025; AUC, 2015), and in national strategies in countries such as Rwanda, which position higher education and technical training as levers for upgrading within global value chains (Tikly, 2019a). While such coordination may reduce exposure to market volatility and reliance on transnational metrics, it does not dismantle regimes of inequality.

Selective investment and technocratic planning can reproduce spatial and institutional stratification, privileging advantaged sectors and regions (Marginson, 2025). Developmental coordination seeks coherence through strategic state intervention while remaining embedded in global circuits of accumulation and geopolitical competition (Callinicos, 2009).

A fourth project is liberal reformist repair, which aims to preserve and incrementally update the multilateral settlement associated with Education for All and SDG 4. Crisis is understood less as structural disarticulation than as a failure of implementation, financing and global solidarity; the remedy lies in renewed cooperation, strengthened equity commitments and improved coordination across international institutions. Epistemic authority rests on multilateral expertise and rights-based frameworks, with UNESCO, segments of the European Union and transnational civil society as central proponents (Tikly, 2017). Recent multilateral processes illustrate renewal within constraint. UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative and the Transforming Education Summit reaffirm education as a public good and call for a new social contract (UNESCO, 2021c; United Nations, 2022), while the Global Partnership for Education prioritises data systems and learning assessment alongside equity commitments (GPE, 2020). Yet the formation operates within the structural constraints of fiscal austerity, geopolitical rivalry and digital platformisation (Zürn, 2018), and it frequently relies on the targets, indicators and performance-monitoring instruments characteristic of technocratic optimisation, thereby reproducing managerial approaches even as it broadens inclusion. It represents an effort to stabilise the regime through normative renewal rather than structural reconfiguration.

Alongside these hegemonic formations, counter-hegemonic knowledge projects continue to contest dominant articulations. Decolonial, feminist, Indigenous and ecological approaches challenge the political economy and the epistemic assumptions embedded in liberal and technocratic regimes, foregrounding epistemic justice, relational ontologies and education as a commons. Crisis is interpreted not as performance failure or cultural disruption but as the outcome of historically entrenched regimes of inequality and coloniality (de Sousa Santos, 2007; Tikly, 2019b; Hutchinson et al., 2023; Milligan et al., 2025). The coalitions supporting these orientations are diverse and unevenly resourced: grassroots and Indigenous movements, feminist networks, teacher unions, student and youth movements, critical scholars and climate justice organisations. Their initiatives span the three dimensions of justice at stake in the post-2030 settlement, the social, the epistemic and the environmental. Struggles over social justice include teacher union campaigns against the commercialisation of schooling and transnational debt justice advocacy; struggles over epistemic justice include student movements for curriculum decolonisation such as RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall, the validation of Indigenous knowledge systems, efforts to redress North-South asymmetries in knowledge production such as the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations (Aboderin et al., 2023); struggles over environmental justice include youth climate movements' demands for climate education and the networks advancing environmental and sustainability education (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2017). Feminist movements cut across all three, linking the critique of girls' education as 'smart economics' to demands for gender-transformative curricula and pedagogy (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Unterhalter, 2007). These counter-projects face structural asymmetries in funding, institutional access and agenda-setting power, yet heightened visibility of inequality, racial and gender injustice and ecological breakdown has increased their discursive salience. The erosion of liberal consensus creates openings for rearticulation even as it intensifies the risks of authoritarian retrenchment and technocratic narrowing. The boundary with liberal reformist repair offers some potential for counter-hegemonic intervention. Shared commitments to equity, rights and education as a public good make reformist arenas, from debt-for-education initiatives to the common-good framing of AI governance and the teacher agenda,

potential sites of strategic alliance through which counter-hegemonic priorities can gain institutional footholds.

The post-2030 process as a terrain of struggle

The consultation machinery described earlier is where these projects now converge. The sequencing is significant. The regime's institutions, acting through the Steering Committee, are organising to arrive at the intergovernmental stage with a framework already consolidated. Consultation is where hegemony is being organised in advance of negotiation. Why hegemonic work has migrated upstream of formal negotiation is itself explicable within the framework. Under organic crisis, no bloc commands the authority to guarantee that its preferred settlement would survive intergovernmental ratification; the formal machinery is visibly weakened by withdrawal, contested language and fiscal strain. The contest therefore shifts, in Gramsci's terms, from a war of manoeuvre to a war of position. Consent is organised instead in the preparatory terrain of consultations, foresight exercises, benchmarks and infrastructures, so that negotiation ratifies what the pre-constitutional phase has already made actionable, while contracting resources raise the stakes of controlling problem definitions early.

Nor is the mechanism confined to any one camp. China's Global Development Initiative has been read in these terms, as a case of institutional layering, the mode of gradual change in which new rules and bodies are attached alongside existing ones and shift their operation without formally replacing them (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Taggart et al., 2026), a reading developed below. The contrast with the last transition is instructive. The consultations that preceded 2015, from the Education for All Steering Committee through Muscat to Incheon, fed a live intergovernmental process already mandated through Rio+20 and the Open Working Group; the current framework is being consolidated before any mandate exists, on the Steering Committee's executive authority rather than a General Conference resolution. The 2015 settlement was articulated at the regime's high point, with aid expanding; its successor is being designed as aid to education is projected to fall by around a third (UNESCO, 2026b). Then, rights and human capital rationales still cohered within a single compact; now no bloc can guarantee ratification. Above all, the object of contest has shifted from the content of goals to the instruments beneath them, including benchmarks, data infrastructures and financing rules. Each project is visible within the machinery, as Table 2 summarises.

The technocratic project advances through the national benchmarking apparatus and the remaining pre-2030 editions of the Global Education Monitoring Report, with philanthropic foundations holding a constituency seat on the Steering Committee itself (UNESCO and UNESCO-UIS, 2023).

Authoritarian-nationalist pressure bears from without, through the withdrawal of the United States from UNESCO, effective at the end of 2026 and removing roughly eight per cent of its budget, and its denunciation of the SDGs as 'a program of soft global governance' inconsistent with national sovereignty (US Mission to the UN, 2025), and from within, through organised contestation of gender language (Education International, 2025).

Developmental coordination operates by institutional layering rather than by withdrawal from the existing architecture or the construction of a rival one. China's Global Development Initiative shows how this works. It is framed as accelerating the 2030 Agenda and is registered through United Nations partnership mechanisms, yet it advances what Taggart et al. (2026: 1874) describe as a Chinese take on the content of the 2030 Agenda 'and, prospectively, also a post-2030 agenda'. Beijing thus bids to shape the development, financing and digital content of the successor framework from inside the development architecture while holding no seat on the

SDG 4 Steering Committee. Within the education machinery itself, the project is carried by the African Union (AU, 2025). The project thus operates one level up, at the architecture within which any education framework will be nested, which is why the education consultation itself presents as a contest among liberal reformist, technocratic and counter-hegemonic actors, with the developmentalist powers largely absent from the room.

The liberal reformist project holds the machinery itself, from the consultation and the debt-for-education guidelines following the Fortaleza call (UNESCO, 2024a), through the new prominence accorded to the teaching profession by the United Nations High-Level Panel and the 2025 World Summit on Teachers, to the framing of education as a common good in the age of artificial intelligence.

Counter-hegemonic practice operates both within the process, through the youth strand and civil society seats, and against it, through counter-consultations that document the marginalisation of Global South and community voices in agenda-setting (NORRAG, 2026; Morris et al., 2026).

Table 2. The post-2030 process as a terrain of struggle: coalitions, arenas and objectives.

Project	Whose interests	Where in the process	What they seek to lock in
Technocratic-digital optimisation	World Bank, OECD, GPE; EdTech and platform firms; philanthropic foundations (a Steering Committee constituency seat)	National SDG 4 benchmarking as the bridge to successor targets; the remaining pre-2030 GEM Report editions; data and monitoring workstreams	A successor goal anchored in foundational learning metrics; results-based financing; proprietary data infrastructures
Authoritarian-nationalist restoration	The US administration; nationalist governments; aligned bureaucracies and media ecosystems	From without: withdrawal from UNESCO and absence from the Sevilla consensus; from within: contestation of gender language	National control of curriculum and knowledge authority; fragmentation of normative commitments
State-capitalist developmental coordination	Chinese state agencies and GDI institutions; the African Union and member states; development banks	Inside the development architecture by institutional layering (the GDI as UN-registered partnership); absent from the SDG 4 Steering Committee; the AU inside the education machinery (CESA 2026 to 2035); BRI and BRICS financing as implementation channels	The successor's development, financing and digital content reflecting Global South needs; education aligned with industrial strategy; autonomy from transnational metrics
Liberal reformist repair	UNESCO and the Steering Committee secretariat; segments of the EU; INGOs, Education International, civil society	The machinery itself: the consultation and stocktakes; debt-for-education guidelines; the teacher agenda; AI as common good	Renewal of the multilateral settlement; equity and rights commitments; a new social contract for education
Counter-hegemonic projects	Youth and student networks; teacher unions; Indigenous, feminist and climate justice movements; critical research networks	Inside: the youth strand and civil society seats; against: counter-consultations documenting marginalised Global South voices	Broader purposes in the targets; epistemic and debt justice; public data governance

The coexistence of these formations underscores the hegemonic character of the present conjuncture. It also invites a Gramscian test, whereby a project is more than a morbid symptom only if it can build the institutions and consent of a new settlement. Alongside this test of viability stands a test of justice, namely whether the settlement a project builds dismantles or re-

entrenches regimes of inequality. What is at stake is not merely discursive influence but institutional sedimentation. Knowledge projects shape which indicators are adopted, which actors are authorised as experts, which financing modalities are normalised and which educational purposes are rendered measurable. If technocratic-digital optimisation continues to consolidate, the post-2030 settlement is likely to be characterised by intensified metric architectures and deeper integration of public systems into proprietary data infrastructures. Should authoritarian-nationalist restoration gain momentum, fragmentation of normative commitments and curricular divergence across geopolitical blocs may follow. Where developmental coordination prevails, education targets may be interpreted primarily through industrial upgrading strategies. Liberal reformist repair may sustain multilateral architectures, but through hybridisation with managerial instruments. The post-2030 agenda will therefore crystallise not around a singular paradigm but through the uneven institutionalisation of these competing projects in financing rules, digital standards and governance architectures.

Critical hope and the politics of systemic rearticulation

If an organic crisis denotes structured indeterminacy rather than collapse, it also opens a terrain for strategic rearticulation. Critical hope combines 'pessimism of the intellect' with 'optimism of the will' (Gramsci, 1971), a sober recognition of fiscal constraints, infrastructural capture and geopolitical fragmentation, alongside a commitment to constructing alternative alignments. Structures condition action but do not mechanically determine it. The post-2030 moment is therefore neither a routine technocratic transition nor a foreclosed horizon; it is a contested terrain in which competing knowledge projects seek institutional sedimentation within financing architectures, digital infrastructures and governance frameworks already under strain.

The concept also has a distinctively educational lineage, and drawing on it clarifies what critical hope asks of counter-hegemonic projects. For Freire (1994), hope is an ontological need rather than a disposition. It becomes concrete only through the dialectic of denunciation and annunciation, the naming of an unjust present alongside the announcement of a feasible alternative, and it is realised in what he termed 'untested feasibility', the possibility that lies beyond a limit situation and becomes visible only when that situation is confronted rather than accepted as given. Hope without critique is naive and critique without hope is despair; the two are held together in a pedagogy that treats the future as a problem to be worked on rather than a fate to be awaited (Freire, 1970; 1994). Critical pedagogy has developed the idea in several directions that bear on the present analysis. Giroux (2002), following Bloch (1986), distinguishes educated hope, anchored in an analysis of the conditions that constrain it, from the privatised optimism that sustains the existing order; Duncan-Andrade (2009) separates critical hope from what he calls hokey hope, the hope that ignores the material conditions in which it is professed; and work in the Southern African context has examined how critical hope is discerned in educational practice under conditions of entrenched inequality (Bozalek et al., 2014). What this literature adds to Gramsci's formula is a specification of the register in which hope operates. It is pedagogical, in that alternatives have to be learned and taught, and it is practical, in that hope is warranted only where it is attached to a feasible course of action. Applied to the post-2030 conjuncture, critical hope therefore requires not only the sober analysis of constraint developed above but the identification of untested feasibilities within the regime, the openings through which alternative purposes, knowledges and financing arrangements could be made actionable. The remainder of this section takes up that task.

Counter-hegemonic rearticulation must first intervene at the level of purpose. If the emerging architecture privileges dashboards, performance-based financing and strategic alignment, the question is what ends these infrastructures serve. Repositioning education as a democratic,

relational and ecological practice entails redefining the criteria by which success is judged. Embedding measures of collective wellbeing, ecological literacy, linguistic diversity and democratic participation within accountability systems would shift the normative centre of gravity; without transformation at the level of targets and reporting architectures, expanded purpose would remain rhetorical. The epistemic dimension is equally decisive. Decolonial, feminist and ecological perspectives challenge the coloniality embedded in benchmarking regimes, standardised assessment and Eurocentric curricular hierarchies, but critique alone cannot displace the dominance of metrics. As Unterhalter (2017) argues, measurement is at once indispensable to claims about educational inequality and unable to capture much of what education is for, and the appropriate response is neither to accept the terms of measurement nor to reject it but to work with metrics while keeping the purposes they cannot register on the agenda. The stakes of doing so are material. Algorithmic systems encode assumptions about language and value, and funding criteria and rankings determine which knowledge gains authority. Incorporating diverse epistemologies into the post-2030 settlement therefore requires intervention in indicator design, data governance, research funding and institutional authority; recognition without redistribution of agenda-setting power leaves the core of the regime intact (Fraser, 2008).

Counter-hegemonic struggle cannot rest on normative critique alone. If dominant formations operate through structured knowledge projects that stabilise particular metrics, funding modalities and infrastructures, transformative projects must also take institutional form, developing concepts, indicators, financing strategies and governance proposals of their own, capable of making alternative futures actionable. This requires strategic engagement with the arenas in which the post-2030 agenda is being made, from the consultation strands and meetings set out above to the benchmark-setting, financing and data governance processes beneath them. It will often mean strategic alliance with reformist actors rather than mere ambivalence. Reformist initiatives remain constrained by technocratic assumptions, yet their commitments to equity, sustainability and epistemic pluralism open spaces that counter-hegemonic actors can widen from within; such alliances are the substance of a war of position, provided the transformative horizon is not absorbed into the managerial one. The test that distinguishes alliance from absorption is whether agenda-setting power is redistributed.

Material conditions frame what is possible. Sovereign debt burdens, limited concessional finance and blended funding mechanisms shape the strategic options available to states. Under austerity, optimisation appears realistic, loan conditionalities narrow policy choice, and platforms expand where administrative capacity is thin. Reorienting education towards democratic participation and ecological repair must therefore engage with the politics of fiscal space itself. Debt restructuring, progressive taxation and expanded concessional finance are constitutive of educational transformation rather than separate from it, just as procurement, data ownership and interoperability standards determine who controls infrastructures and who participates in digital governance (Harvey, 2011; Williamson, 2020; Komljenovic, 2021).

The geopolitical dimension conditions these struggles further. Within the poly-imperial order described above, diversifying partnerships, strengthening South-South research networks and constructing solidaristic alliances capable of advancing epistemic justice and ecological sustainability are strategies for expanding policy autonomy within a fractured order. Such strategies operate, however, among institutions and professionals, and the paper's earlier account of counter-hegemonic coalitions suggests a further requirement. Because the inequalities that education reproduces serve national as well as global elites, struggles within education must articulate with the wider struggles of workers, peasants, Indigenous peoples, women, youth and other marginalised groups against the same regimes of inequality (Tikly,

2024b); it is through such articulation, rather than through professional advocacy alone, that a counter-hegemonic project acquires the popular base on which consent for a different settlement could rest. Institutional and popular strategies must in turn coalesce into structured projects if they are to counterbalance the organisational density of dominant blocs.

Organic crisis intensifies indeterminacy without suspending structural power. Critical hope is therefore not moral aspiration detached from material constraint but the disciplined construction of rival articulations across purpose, knowledge, material conditions and geopolitics. Whether structured indeterminacy consolidates into intensified metric governance and geopolitical fragmentation, or opens space for more democratic, pluriversal and ecologically grounded configurations, will depend on the capacity of counter-hegemonic knowledge projects to achieve institutional anchoring within the evolving regime of global education governance.

Conclusion

As the 2030 deadline approaches, the future of global education governance is not being decided as a technical update to SDG 4. It is unfolding within an organic crisis of global capitalism characterised by fiscal constraint, geopolitical fragmentation, digital platformisation and intensifying contestation over epistemic authority. This conjuncture does not signal institutional collapse. It marks a period of structured indeterminacy in which established articulations between accumulation, legitimacy and knowledge are being destabilised and renegotiated and morbid symptoms multiply. That is the answer to the paper's first aim. The answer to the second is the four knowledge projects and their counter-hegemonic contenders, the generative configurations whose contest will define both the meaning of crisis and the terms of its resolution.

The post-2030 settlement will crystallise through decisions that are identifiable now, each carrying the imprint of a knowledge project. Whether the successor goal is anchored in foundational learning metrics or in broader conceptions of educational purpose will set the direction in which education systems are steered for a generation. Whether the national benchmarking apparatus is rolled forward as the template for target-setting will decide how far the next agenda inherits the measurement regime of the last. Which financing modalities are normalised (aid contracts, debt-for-education conversion, blended instruments or renewed compacts for domestic public financing) will set the material conditions of policy autonomy. Further decisions concern how curriculum authority is distributed amid sovereignty claims, whether the new prominence of the teaching profession translates into binding indicators of status, conditions and voice, and who owns and governs education data and digital infrastructures. These are the education-specific stakes, settled less by declarations than by the indicator frameworks, financing rules and data standards in which each project embeds its vision. None of these decisions is neutral, and how each is settled will show which project is winning. Blended finance and proprietary data infrastructures extend the technocratic project, whereas debt conversion is reformist and public financing compacts and public data governance are counter-hegemonic demands; national curriculum control is the authoritarian-nationalist signature. The settlement can be read off these six decisions as they are made.

The window is short. The 2027 SDG Summit opens the intergovernmental discussion; the consolidated education framework is due by the end of 2028; formal negotiations follow, with a successor framework expected around 2030. Counter-hegemonic actors are not external observers of this process but participants within it, and critique alone will not suffice. As the previous section argued, transformative alternatives must develop institutional foundations

comparable to those of the dominant formations; elements of such projects are already visible, though unevenly resourced and institutionally fragile.

The conjuncture is therefore neither a simple continuation nor a decisive rupture, but a moment of rearticulation. Understanding the post-2030 agenda requires attention not only to policy proposals but also to the knowledge projects and material interests through which education governance is organised and contested. The future of global education governance will depend less on the articulation of universal aspirations than on the capacity of competing knowledge projects to embed their visions within the institutional architectures and the consultation processes now under way that will organise education across scales beyond 2030.

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