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The Crisis of Global Education Policy and the Emerging Post-2030 Agenda: A Neo-Gramscian Perspective

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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.”
— Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

Abstract

As the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals approaches, the emerging post-2030 education agenda is unfolding amid an ongoing, organic crisis of global capitalism characterised by fiscal constraint, geopolitical fragmentation, digital consolidation, and intensifying contestation over epistemic authority. This article develops a neo-Gramscian framework to conceptualise global education policy as a multi-scalar regime linking material interests, institutional architectures and knowledge projects across interconnected domains. It traces the historical articulation of the liberal and neoliberal education regime from 1945 to its consolidation under SDG 4, before analysing its contemporary disarticulation across economic, political, epistemic and ecological spheres. Four competing knowledge projects are identified and examined as relational processes of rearticulation within an increasingly poly-imperial order: technocratic-digital optimisation, authoritarian nationalism, state developmentalism and liberal humanist restoration. The article argues that the post-2030 settlement will be shaped less by formal goal-setting than by struggles over the material, institutional and epistemic infrastructures through which education is governed, financed and known, and considers the conditions under which counter-hegemonic projects oriented towards social, epistemic and environmental justice might achieve institutional durability.

Introduction

As the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approaches, preparations for a successor framework are already 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. Slowing global economic growth, fiscal austerity, widening inequalities within and between countries (Piketty, 2014), 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 have destabilised the liberal and neoliberal education regime that structured global governance for much of the post-war period. These shifts are not merely conjunctural but signal deeper transformations in the organisation of global capitalism, including the reconfiguration of authority across state, market and technological actors.

The epigraph from Gramsci provides an entry point into this argument. The "old" refers to the liberal and later neoliberal settlement that linked education to development, state legitimacy, and the formation of human capital through relatively stable institutional and epistemic structures. The "new" does not signify a fully developed successor order but an emerging and contested set of projects aiming to reorganise these relationships under changing historical conditions. The current conjuncture can thus be seen as an interregnum, a period during which a hegemonic alignment is losing coherence, yet no alternative has been firmly established. The "morbid symptoms" of this interregnum are evident within education through heightened fiscal pressure, increased control of governance by digital infrastructures, the resurgence of authoritarian and ethno-nationalist politics, the normalisation of education

in emergency contexts, the destruction of educational systems amid war and occupation, and the growing gap between sustainability commitments and development driven by accumulation. What is at stake is not just policy change but the contest over the terms on which a new settlement might, or might not, arise.

These struggles, it is argued, unfold within historically constituted regimes of inequality that shape how privilege, precarity and power are distributed across and within societies along lines of class, race, gender, ethnicity, indigeneity, rurality, disability, sexuality and exposure to environmental risk. Education is implicated in these processes not only as a site where knowledge hierarchies are produced and contested, but also as a mechanism for allocating resources, opportunities, and positional advantages. Patterns of access, credential differentiation, language policy, financing arrangements and knowledge governance influence life chances and labour market trajectories while shaping states' positions within global circuits of accumulation and power. Under conditions of crisis, these arrangements become increasingly contested as existing distributions of resources, authority and knowledge are destabilised.

This article contends 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. It develops a neo-Gramscian framework to conceptualise global education policy as a multi-scalar regime linking material interests, institutional architectures and knowledge projects, and examines how competing projects seek to rearticulate education under conditions of fiscal constraint, digital platformisation and poly-imperial rivalry. The analysis proceeds retroductively from observable institutional developments including the expansion of learning metrics, the growth of performance-based financing, the platformisation of governance infrastructures, the politicisation of curriculum authority, rather than from speculative projection. Grounded in a normative commitment to social, environmental and epistemic justice, it seeks to clarify the structural conditions under which counter-hegemonic articulations of global education governance might achieve institutional durability. Institutional architectures endure, but the hegemonic alignments that once stabilised them are fragmenting. 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 organise and govern education across scales.

Conceptual Framework

This article conceptualises global education policy as embedded within broader configurations of world order. Drawing on neo-Gramscian scholarship in International Political Economy, world order is understood as a historically contingent alignment of material interests, institutions and ideas (Cox, 1987; Gill, 1993). As Cox (1981: 128) famously argued, theory is "always for someone and for some purpose." Global education governance cannot, therefore, be analysed as a neutral terrain but must be understood as emerging from struggles over accumulation, legitimacy and authority. Transnational institutions play a key role in stabilising particular configurations of capitalist restructuring by embedding prevailing economic priorities within legal, regulatory and policy frameworks that shape national governance (Gill, 1998; van Apeldoorn, 2002). 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.

Within this broader framework, global education policy can be viewed as a historically specific policy regime. Following Jessop (2016), a regime refers to a relatively stabilised configuration of material interests, institutional structures and epistemic frameworks that shape policy over time. In the context of education, this regime operates across interconnected material, institutional, epistemic and pedagogical domains. The material domain includes the economic conditions, financing structures and infrastructures that support education systems. The institutional domain pertains to organisations, governance arrangements and regulatory frameworks. The epistemic domain concerns the types of knowledge, evidence, and truth claims that influence policy and practice, while the pedagogical domain covers the processes of teaching, learning, and curriculum development. Although these domains are analytically distinct, they are empirically intertwined, and their alignment is crucial for the relative stability of global education policy over time. What seems like a global consensus is thus the provisional result of articulated alignments across dispersed sites of power, connecting multilateral organisations, development banks, donor agencies, philanthropic foundations, regional bodies and national governments through mechanisms such as financing, benchmarking, professional norms and data infrastructure (Verger et al., 2018; Tikly, 2017).

These alignments are structured within historically constituted regimes of inequality: durable yet evolving configurations of economic exploitation, geopolitical hierarchy and epistemic stratification through which privilege, precarity and oppression are organised and reproduced across and within societies (Walby, 2009; Tikly, 2019). These regimes operate through intersecting axes of differentiation, including class, race, gender, ethnicity, indigeneity, rurality, disability, sexuality and exposure to environmental risk, whose dynamics are partially autonomous yet mutually reinforcing. Education is embedded within these formations not only as a site of epistemic ordering but also as a mechanism of economic allocation, social reproduction and geopolitical positioning. Under conditions of crisis, tensions within these regimes intensify as established distributions of resources, authority and knowledge come under renewed contestation.

Central to this framework are Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and articulation. Hegemony is understood not merely as domination but as the capacity of specific social forces to establish leadership through a combination of material power, institutional structures and the organisation of consent, stabilised within a historical bloc that coherently links processes of accumulation, governance and meaning-making (Gramsci, 1971; Cox, 1987). Articulation refers to the political and discursive work through which heterogeneous elements, including economic strategies, institutional forms, social identities and knowledge claims, are linked into provisional unities (Hall, 1986; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). 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 (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964), modernisation theory (Inkeles and Smith, 1974), neoliberal competitiveness, rights-based approaches and sustainability discourses have each functioned as nodal points through which broader economic strategies were rendered socially intelligible. Disarticulation occurs when these linkages weaken and when economic outcomes, political authority and legitimating narratives cease to reinforce one another. These alignments are always provisional and contested, and it is precisely their provisional character that makes the current conjuncture analytically legible as a moment of crisis rather than mere turbulence.

This weakening is captured by the concept of organic crisis, which refers to a historically specific erosion of the alignment among economic structures, political authority, and

dominant ideas (Gramsci, 1971; Cox, 1987). While the current conjuncture is often described as a "polycrisis," the concept of organic crisis highlights something more historically specific: not merely systemic turbulence but the disintegration of a hegemonic settlement linking accumulation, governance and knowledge. Viewed through a complex realist ontology (Bhaskar, 1978; Bhaskar, 2010; Byrne and Callaghan, 2014), crisis is not an episodic breakdown but a layered and emergent process unfolding within open social systems. Economic, political, cultural and environmental domains possess relative autonomy, each structured by distinct generative mechanisms and unfolding according to different temporal logics, yet interacting contingently through feedback effects and temporal lags such that developments in one sphere may precipitate delayed, accelerated or uneven responses in others (Walby, 2009; 2015; Urry, 2016). The result is structured indeterminacy: a condition in which institutional continuity may coexist with declining legitimacy, and adaptive reforms in one sphere may displace or intensify contradictions elsewhere. Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach further clarifies how structures condition but do not determine action, foregrounding the strategic role of agency in shaping trajectories under conditions of crisis.

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 conceptualises the persistence of these hierarchies as the coloniality of power and knowledge (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Education systems have institutionalised Eurocentric epistemologies as universal standards while marginalising alternative knowledge systems and languages (Hutchinson et al., 2023; Tikly, 2024b; Santos, 2007; 2017). Coloniality operates not as a residual feature but as a constitutive dimension of the regime itself, and the framework developed here provides a means of tracing how colonial hierarchies are embedded and enacted through specific policy mechanisms, including financing arrangements, benchmarking systems, language regimes, curriculum frameworks and digital infrastructures.

The contemporary conjuncture must also be situated within what Harvey (2003) terms the new imperialism: a reconfiguration of imperial relations emerging in response to earlier crises of capitalist accumulation (see also Tikly, 2004). Contemporary imperial formations operate through market-mediated mechanisms including financialisation, privatisation and accumulation by dispossession, while also rearticulating older colonial practices. Education has become one such terrain, with the expansion of low-fee private schooling (Verger et al., 2016; Srivastava, 2013), the growing role of private equity in education technology (Williamson, 2020; Williamson and Hogan, 2020) and the subordination of education policy to sovereign debt regimes (UNESCO, 2023b) illustrating how education is incorporated into circuits of global accumulation. The current conjuncture is further characterised by poly-imperialisms: a fragmented configuration in which multiple centres of geopolitical power operate within a system still shaped by the historical dominance of Western institutions and epistemologies. This includes an internally divided Atlantic bloc, China's expanding development finance networks (Rolland, 2017; Jones and Zeng, 2019), the European Union's regulatory influence (Bradford, 2020) and Gulf sovereign wealth funds (Hanieh, 2018), alongside globally influential technology corporations operating within platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017; Williamson, 2020). These overlapping formations create fragmentation within hegemony rather than a stable multipolar equilibrium (Callinicos, 2009), with education governance increasingly implicated through financing arrangements, benchmarking systems and digital infrastructures that function simultaneously as mechanisms of rent

extraction, terrains of geopolitical competition and means through which colonial asymmetries are reproduced in infrastructural form (Kwet, 2019).

Within this framework, the concept of knowledge projects encapsulates the epistemic dimension of struggles to interpret and govern education under conditions of organic crisis. Knowledge projects are organised assemblages of ideas, metrics, actors and institutional practices through which competing coalitions define educational problems, legitimise specific visions of development and shape the policy instruments through which governance operates. They operate within regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980), understood as historically specific configurations of knowledge, authority and practice that determine what counts as valid knowledge, whose expertise is recognised, and how truth claims are produced, circulated and legitimised. Simultaneously, they take material form through indicators, standards, financing criteria and digital infrastructures.

Knowledge projects are not, however, equivalent to hegemonic formations in the full Gramscian sense. A hegemonic formation, or historical bloc, encompasses the entire alignment of material interests, institutional structures and ideas through which specific social forces establish leadership and organise consent within a given world order, whereas a knowledge project is the specifically epistemic dimension of such a formation: the organised intellectual work through which the interests of particular social forces are translated into universally intelligible claims, governance categories and policy instruments. In Gramscian terms, knowledge projects are the work of what he called organic intellectuals, whose function is to give a social formation homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields (Gramsci, 1971). This distinction has several important implications. A single hegemonic formation may generate more than one knowledge project, and knowledge projects may overlap across formations whose material interests differ in important respects, as the relationship between technocratic-digital optimisation and liberal humanist restoration illustrates. Knowledge projects also possess a degree of relative autonomy from the material and institutional dimensions of the formations they serve: epistemic struggles have their own dynamics, temporalities, and sites of contestation that are not simply determined by the underlying political economy, even as they remain structurally conditioned by it. This relative autonomy is what makes the epistemic dimension analytically significant in its own right, rather than merely expressive of interests constituted elsewhere, and what justifies treating knowledge projects as a distinct level of analysis within the broader neo-Gramscian framework developed here.

The distinction between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic knowledge projects is treated here as relational rather than normative. In the current conjuncture, no single project can be assumed to be fully hegemonic at the global level. Projects that challenge dominant arrangements may therefore be counter-hegemonic in a positional sense, even where they seek to reconstitute exclusionary forms of order. This is particularly consequential for understanding projects associated with emerging state-developmental formations, which may contest Western hegemony within the poly-imperial order while reproducing or reconfiguring imperial and developmental logics under different geopolitical auspices. For this reason, the analysis distinguishes between projects that contest existing configurations of power and those that are genuinely emancipatory in their orientation towards transforming regimes of inequality.

Power, as understood in this framework, is not a single phenomenon but a configuration of mutually conditioning modalities operating across different scales and domains. Drawing on

Barnett and Duvall's (2005) typology of power in global governance, as applied to the field of education and development in Tikly (2017), the analysis distinguishes between material power, understood as the capacity to control resources, financing and the infrastructures of accumulation; institutional power, understood as the capacity to shape agendas, governance arrangements and regulatory frameworks through organisational authority; epistemic power, understood as the capacity to define legitimate knowledge, authorise expertise and constitute the categories through which problems are rendered governable; and coercive power, understood as the capacity to enforce compliance and, in extreme cases, to eliminate the conditions of collective life. These modalities are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined: material interests condition but do not determine institutional arrangements, which in turn shape the epistemic terrain within which knowledge projects operate, while coercive power both underpins and occasionally ruptures the hegemonic alignments that the other modalities sustain. It is the interaction between these modalities, rather than any single dimension of power, that shapes the dynamics of the post-2030 conjuncture and that the analysis across the following sections seeks to trace.

The analysis that follows proceeds abductively and retroductively, reinterpreting observable institutional developments within the conceptual framework set out above to identify the generative mechanisms shaping the post-2030 conjuncture. The primary sources informing the analysis include policy texts, institutional strategy documents, financing data and governance frameworks produced by multilateral organisations, development banks, regional bodies and civil society organisations, read in relation to the critical secondary literature on global education governance. Following Danermark (2002), abductive reasoning involves recontextualising individual phenomena within a conceptual framework so as to render them newly intelligible, while retroduction moves from observable patterns to the underlying structures and mechanisms that make those patterns possible. This is necessarily a fallible rather than definitive account: the framework generates analytical purchase on the conjuncture, but the conjuncture itself remains open and contested. The article is therefore offered as a contribution to an ongoing debate rather than a settled interpretation.

The Historical Articulation of the Liberal and Neoliberal Education Regime, 1945–2015

The current crisis in global education policy can only be understood in relation to the historical development of the liberal and later neoliberal education and development regime. The historical development of this regime has been analysed in detail elsewhere (Tikly, 2004; Robertson et al., 2007; Mundy and Manion, 2015; Tikly, 2017); the account that follows draws on these analyses to identify the key rearticulations relevant to the argument developed here. Since 1945, education has been repeatedly linked to changing projects of accumulation, state-building, and geopolitical reordering, operating as a multi-scalar regime that connects multilateral governance, regional mediation, and national systems within historically established regimes of inequality. The following trajectory can be understood as a series of contingent rearticulations in which the relationships between accumulation, legitimacy and educational purpose have been temporarily stabilised within shifting world orders.

Following the Second World War, education became a key aspect of rebuilding in Western Europe and North America, as well as in newly independent states focused on nation-building. In advanced capitalist economies, mass public education was coordinated with Keynesian growth policies, welfare expansion and efforts to promote democratic citizenship

(Green, 1997). Simultaneously, international human rights frameworks established education as a universal right, linking it to dignity, equality and participation. In postcolonial settings, constitutional commitments to free and compulsory education symbolised sovereignty and collective progress, even as colonial structures continued to influence institutional forms and epistemic hierarchies.

Human capital theory increasingly made this settlement intelligible in economic terms (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964). Education was seen as an investment in productivity and competitiveness, linking schooling with accumulation strategies at both national and global levels. Rights discourse and human capital arguments were not opposed but articulated within a broader developmental agreement in which economic growth, social integration and political legitimacy supported one another. Decolonisation reshaped but did not dismantle these hierarchies. Across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, rapid educational expansion signified modern nationhood and developmental aspiration (Altbach and Kelly, 1978; Robertson et al., 2007), yet reliance on external finance, technical expertise and curricular models reproduced asymmetries within a global order structured by colonial legacies and unequal exchange (Tikly, 2004). The post-war articulation thus expanded formal access and institutional legitimacy while remaining embedded in enduring regimes of inequality linking economic dependency, geopolitical hierarchy and epistemic subordination.

The economic crises of the 1970s destabilised this settlement. Stagflation in advanced economies and debt crises across much of the Global South prompted a shift towards market-oriented restructuring. From the early 1980s, structural adjustment programmes promoted fiscal austerity, trade liberalisation and state retrenchment (Samoff, 1994). The World Bank adopted a more directive role in education policy, advancing rate-of-return analysis and prioritising basic education as the most efficient public investment (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall, 1985; Psacharopoulos, 1990; 1994). Cost-sharing, decentralisation and private provision were promoted as mechanisms of efficiency and accountability (Robertson et al., 2007). Schooling was increasingly framed as an individual investment in human capital rather than primarily as a collective social right, and governance shifted towards performance measurement, cost-efficiency and accountability, embedding education more deeply within global circuits of accumulation (Harvey, 2003). These transformations unfolded unevenly: highly indebted states experienced expenditure cuts and widening inequality, while parts of East Asia combined market reforms with ongoing state coordination (Green, 1999). Neoliberal restructuring restored macroeconomic discipline but intensified stratification within and between national systems.

By the mid-1990s, the social costs of adjustment had become harder to ignore. The post-Washington Consensus recalibrated the framework to incorporate institutional reform, poverty reduction and governance capacity while retaining market-oriented principles (Stiglitz, 1998; 1999; 2002). The Education for All movement, formalised at Jomtien (UNESCO, 1990) and reaffirmed at Dakar (World Education Forum, 2000), sought to restore legitimacy through renewed commitments to universal access and gender parity. This phase represented not rupture but hybridisation: social investment discourse coexisted with imperatives of competitiveness and efficiency (Tikly, 2017), enrolment expanded significantly at the primary level, yet resource constraints and quality disparities persisted, and the underlying tensions generated by marketisation, coloniality and uneven development remained unresolved.

The global financial crisis of 2008 marked a further inflection point. Fiscal austerity in advanced economies and renewed debt pressures across the Global South constrained public expenditure. At the same time, concern intensified that expanded enrolment had not translated into measurable learning gains. The discourse of a global learning crisis reframed educational challenges in terms of deficits in foundational skills (World Bank, 2018), and governance increasingly operated through metrics, benchmarking and performance indicators, consolidating a technocratic mode of regulation. Digital technologies expanded across administration and pedagogy, laying the groundwork for subsequent platformisation.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 represented both consolidation and strain. SDG 4 articulated an expansive normative vision of inclusive, equitable and quality education encompassing lifelong learning and sustainability, marking the high point of institutional density within the liberal and neoliberal education regime. Yet the conditions under which this settlement was articulated had already shifted. Slowing economic growth, rising inequality, ecological crisis and intensifying geopolitical rivalry weakened the material and ideological foundations of the multilateral consensus.

Each rearticulation across these phases displaced certain tensions while generating new contradictions. Post-war developmentalism expanded access while reproducing colonial hierarchies. Neoliberal restructuring restored macroeconomic discipline while deepening stratification and commodifying provision. Post-Washington recalibration mitigated social costs without transforming underlying inequalities. Technocratic consolidation strengthened performance management while narrowing educational purpose to what could be measured and governed. By the mid-2010s, the connection between accumulation, legitimacy and educational promise had become increasingly fragile. SDG 4 thus coincided with an emerging disconnection across economic, political, epistemic and ecological spheres, and the post-2030 agenda emerges not within a stable settlement but within a context in which the historical coordination of the liberal and neoliberal education regime is under ongoing and deepening 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 initiated a prolonged process of disarticulation across economic, political, geopolitical and environmental domains. In neo-Gramscian terms, this period is best understood as an organic crisis, a condition in which the alignment between accumulation, political legitimacy and dominant knowledge frameworks progressively weakens. This crisis unfolds unevenly through institutional recalibrations, emerging contradictions and struggles over authority across scales. Its effects are visible not only in moments of macro-political disruption but also in the everyday practices through which education systems are governed, financed and contested.

These dynamics are unfolding within a specific and rapidly evolving institutional landscape. Preparations for a post-2030 framework are already underway across multiple arenas, though they have yet to coalesce into a shared successor vision. UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative (UNESCO, 2021c) and the Transforming Education Summit convened by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2022 (United Nations, 2022) have advanced themes of inclusion, sustainability and a renewed social contract for education, emphasising humanistic values, epistemic pluralism and the right to education as a public good. The Global Partnership for Education, the principal multilateral financing platform for education in low-

and lower-middle-income countries, has continued to prioritise learning outcomes, system strengthening and results-based financing, reflecting the ongoing influence of technocratic-developmental frameworks within the aid architecture (GPE, 2020). The 2024 Pact for the Future (UN, 2024b) and the Global Digital Compact (UN, 2024a) have formalised digital connectivity, data governance and artificial intelligence as constitutive elements of the emerging development architecture, embedding education within a broader infrastructural turn that is simultaneously a mechanism of coordination, a frontier of accumulation and a terrain of geopolitical contestation. Taken together, these initiatives do not represent a convergent vision but a pre-constitutional moment in which the material, institutional and epistemic foundations of the next regime are being actively contested before the formal definition of goals. The tensions between them are not incidental but reflect the competing knowledge projects examined later in the article: between humanistic renewal and technocratic optimisation, between multilateral norm-setting and financing conditionalities, and between developmental sovereignty and digital dependency. It is against this backdrop that the organic crisis of the existing regime must be understood.

At the material level, structural fragilities within financialised capitalism have constrained the foundations of the education regime. Recovery following 2008 was uneven and accompanied by stagnant productivity growth and widening inequality (Piketty, 2014; Harvey, 2011). In low- and middle-income countries, rising public debt, compounded by the fiscal effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, has sharply limited fiscal space (UNCTAD, 2022; World Bank and UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023; IMF, 2023). In several contexts, debt servicing now exceeds public expenditure on education, and public investment has stagnated or declined in real terms across many systems (World Bank et al., 2022; World Bank, 2022).

These pressures are reinforced by shifts in the global aid architecture. Although Official Development Assistance reached record nominal levels in 2022, much of this reflected support for Ukraine and in-donor refugee costs rather than sustained investment in education systems. Country programmable aid to education has stagnated since 2016 and shows signs of contraction (UNESCO, 2025). Education's share of overall aid has declined, while financing has become increasingly fragmented, project-based and reliant on loans. The expansion of blended finance has further exposed education systems to indebtedness and volatility. Under these conditions, the human capital articulation is increasingly strained, as constrained public investment and precarious labour markets undermine the promise that schooling secures upward mobility. Sovereign debt regimes, capital market discipline and credit-rating systems continue to delimit national fiscal autonomy, particularly in the Global South (Harvey, 2011; UNCTAD, 2022), while education systems are increasingly drawn into circuits of accumulation through financial instruments and governance reforms, echoing processes of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2011).

At the epistemic level, the discourse of a global learning crisis represents a key moment of attempted rearticulation. The World Bank's World Development Report (2018) reframed crisis in terms of measurable deficits in foundational skills, positioning learning outcomes as the central indicator of system performance. This framing seeks to stabilise the regime by re-establishing a link between education and development through metrics, structured pedagogy and scalable interventions. However, it narrows the field of intelligibility. As Sriprakash et al. (2019) argue, the learning crisis functions as a racial project by obscuring the historical and structural production of inequality. Colonial legacies, racialised dispossession and the unequal valuation of human life are displaced, while inequality is rendered as technical inefficiency. Similar reductions occur across other axes. Class is reframed as household

poverty, gender as participation gaps, and disability or ethnicity as statistical categories detached from histories of exclusion. Structural contradictions are translated into managerial problems, containing crisis within technocratic parameters.

At the institutional and political levels, the regime is further destabilised by fragmentation and contestation. Declining trust in technocratic governance, scepticism towards multilateral institutions and the rise of authoritarian nationalist movements have reshaped the terrain of education policy (Mounk, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Zürn, 2018). Education has become a key site of struggle over national identity, historical memory and cultural authority. Curriculum reform, debates over diversity and inclusion, and challenges to liberal norms reflect broader conflicts over epistemic authority, which often intersect with religious and cultural claims as competing projects seek to reassert moral authority over educational purpose.

Geopolitical realignment further complicates governance. The relative rise of China and the growing assertiveness of other regional powers, including the expanding BRICS grouping, contribute to an increasingly poly-imperial order. While not a unified bloc, initiatives such as the New Development Bank signal attempts to reshape elements of the global economic architecture. Education is implicated through infrastructure finance, research collaboration and digital ecosystems. Chinese initiatives integrate education within broader industrial and connectivity strategies, while BRICS countries embed skills development and higher education within national development agendas. At the same time, United States and European technology firms consolidate influence through cloud services, learning platforms and data infrastructures (Williamson, 2020; Zuboff, 2019; Kwet, 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, corporations such as Google and Microsoft became embedded within national systems through remote learning infrastructures (Williamson and Hogan, 2020; Komljenovic, 2021; West, 2023). Control over digital standards and data has thus become a central dimension of governance. The formal embedding of digital governance within the 2024 Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact reflects the consolidation of this infrastructural turn.

Coercive power remains intertwined with these dynamics. Armed conflict, sanctions and geopolitical rivalry shape fiscal priorities and governance conditions. The war on Gaza, the war in Ukraine and tensions in East Asia illustrate the continued role of violence in sustaining global hierarchies, disproportionately affecting populations in the Global South and reinforcing displacement, humanitarian dependency and the diversion of resources from social investment (Novelli and Kutan, 2024).

Environmental disruption adds further strain. Climate-related disasters intensify displacement and resource pressures, particularly in already marginalised regions. Although Education for Sustainable Development is embedded within global frameworks, implementation remains uneven and often instrumental (UNESCO, 2021a; UNESCO, 2021b; UNESCO, 2023a). Sustainability is frequently subordinated to growth-oriented paradigms, while dominant curricula marginalise local ecological knowledge (Jickling and Wals, 2008; Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2017). The tension between ecological limits and accumulation remains unresolved.

The expansion of education in emergencies illustrates how these pressures converge. Protracted conflict, displacement and instability have increased the number of learners affected by crisis, and the institutionalisation of emergency governance risks normalising

chronic crisis in ways that limit more transformative responses (Mitchell et al., 2025). These dynamics are developed further in the discussion of knowledge projects that follows.

From a complex realist perspective, organic crisis does not entail collapse but structured indeterminacy. Institutional forms persist, but their coherence is weakened. The growing misalignment between economic structures, political authority and dominant knowledge frameworks creates a volatile terrain in which competing knowledge projects seek to rearticulate the regime. The post-2030 agenda emerges within this conjuncture, not as a continuation of a stable settlement but as a site of ongoing struggle over the future organisation of global education governance.

Competing Knowledge Projects and the Rearticulation of the Post-2030 Agenda

The post-2030 agenda does not arise from a shared understanding of the current situation but through competing efforts to define, stabilise and govern it. The present moment is characterised by a disconnection between processes of accumulation, legitimacy and social reproduction that cannot be resolved through gradual reform, experienced and mediated through regimes of inequality perpetuated by both material structures and epistemic hierarchies. These interpretations of crisis are not merely descriptive but are efforts to reorganise the relationships between purpose, knowledge, material conditions and geopolitics in ways that stabilise or transform power structures.

The analysis that follows examines four knowledge projects as competing processes of rearticulation, each seeking to align the material, institutional, epistemic and pedagogical domains identified earlier while engaging with regimes of inequality in distinct ways. The projects are presented as ideal-typical formations that overlap and interact in practice but illuminate contrasting logics through which the global education policy regime is being reconfigured. Each is marked by internal tensions and contradictions, and while analytically distinct, they draw on overlapping actors and resources, contributing to emergent and contested configurations of power rather than mapping neatly onto fully consolidated historical blocs. Hegemonic projects seek to secure leadership by aligning material interests, institutional arrangements and epistemic frameworks into relatively coherent configurations of power. Counter-hegemonic projects, by contrast, seek to transform these alignments by reconstituting the underlying relations through which regimes of inequality are produced and legitimised. These are not fixed categories but relational positions within an ongoing field of struggle: not all projects that contest existing arrangements are counter-hegemonic in a transformative sense, and many represent alternative hegemonic formations that challenge specific configurations of power while reproducing underlying relations of domination.

A first knowledge project, technocratic-digital optimisation, represents the most consolidated hegemonic attempt to stabilise the existing regime. Materially, it is aligned with new circuits of accumulation associated with platform capitalism, data extraction and the expansion of global education technology markets (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019; Kwet, 2019), supported by the financial power of multilateral development banks, philanthropic capital and corporate investment. Within regimes of inequality, this project tends to reframe structural disparities as deficits in human capital and learning outcomes, rendering them legible through metrics such as "learning poverty" while abstracting from their historical and political-economic determinants (Sriprakash et al., 2019). As Sriprakash et al. argue, the learning crisis functions

as a racial project: colonial legacies, racialised dispossession and the unequal valuation of human life are displaced, while inequality is rendered as technical inefficiency. Class is reframed as household poverty, gender as participation gaps, and disability or ethnicity as statistical categories detached from histories of exclusion.

Institutionally, this project is associated with dense global policy networks involving the World Bank and OECD, development banks, INGOs, consultancies and corporate actors in the education technology sector, increasingly mediated through digital platforms that integrate education systems into transnational infrastructures of governance, standardisation and data circulation (Verger et al., 2018; Williamson and Hogan, 2020; Komljenovic, 2021). Philanthropic actors selectively incorporate discourses of equity and sustainability where these enhance legitimacy while remaining aligned with the underlying logic of optimisation (Ball and Olmedo, 2012; Reich, 2018). Epistemically, the project privileges forms of knowledge that are standardised, quantifiable and comparable, reinforcing regimes of truth centred on measurement and benchmarking (Crossley, 2014; Williamson, 2017), while marginalising religious and spiritual knowledge systems as cultural variables rather than legitimate sources of authority. Pedagogically, it favours measurable learning outcomes, competency frameworks and scalable interventions, privileging efficiency over contextual responsiveness. While foregrounding inequality rhetorically, it tends to address symptoms rather than structural causes (Pritchett, 2013), marked by tensions between global standardisation and local diversity, between claims to neutrality and the exercise of epistemic power, and between expanded access to data and concentrated control over its use.

A second project, authoritarian nationalism, responds to the conjuncture through a different configuration of interests and logics, one rooted in the organic crisis of liberal hegemony itself. The erosion of the post-war settlement, the hollowing out of democratic institutions under neoliberal governance and the visible failures of technocratic management have generated the conditions in which authoritarian and nationalist projects can present themselves as authentic responses to popular grievance. Yet this project is not merely a politics of resentment: it is constitutively racialised and civilisational in its logic. Its mobilising grammar organises popular disaffection along axes of ethnic belonging, religious identity and civilisational hierarchy, displacing class-based and structural analyses of inequality with narratives of cultural threat, demographic displacement and national restoration. In doing so, it draws on and intensifies historically sedimented hierarchies of race and ethnicity that the liberal and neoliberal settlement never dismantled but rather managed and partially occluded. The racialised character of this project is not incidental to its appeal but constitutive of it: the political community in whose name it acts is always already defined by ethnic, religious or civilisational boundaries that exclude racialised minorities, migrants, Indigenous peoples and those whose identities transgress sanctioned norms of gender and sexuality. The formation takes different institutional expressions across contexts — majoritarian democracy, electoral authoritarianism and settler-colonial occupation — while sharing a common logic of racialised domination enacted through and against educational institutions. Materially, it is supported by alliances linking state elites, conservative social movements and segments of national capital mobilised around projects of cultural restoration and political consolidation, though its relationship to capital is contradictory: some fractions of finance and industrial capital support it as a vehicle for deregulation and nationalist protectionism, while others resist the instability it generates within global circuits of accumulation (Harvey, 2011; Brubaker, 2017). While frequently framed in opposition to globalisation, it remains deeply entangled within global economic and digital systems,

generating persistent tensions between assertions of sovereignty and ongoing structural interdependence.

In the United States, the articulation of this project through "America First" politics has been accompanied by pressures to scale back foreign assistance and reduce contributions to multilateral institutions. Although the United States remains the largest bilateral donor to education, Official Development Assistance to the sector has stagnated or declined in real terms since the early 2020s (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023b). Given that external financing accounts for between 10 and 25 percent of education expenditure in many low-income countries, and considerably more in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, such retrenchment has material consequences: disruptions to teacher recruitment and salaries, reduced investment in infrastructure and learning materials, and the scaling back of programmes targeting marginalised populations (UNESCO, 2023b; Education Cannot Wait, 2023). These dynamics illustrate how nationalist reorientations of aid policy function as mechanisms through which authoritarian nationalism reshapes global distributions of educational opportunity, reinforcing existing asymmetries within regimes of inequality. While often positioned as a challenge to liberal or technocratic dominance, this project is better understood as a rearticulation of hegemony along nationalist and civilisational lines rather than a counter-hegemonic project oriented towards transforming regimes of inequality.

Institutionally, authoritarian nationalism is associated with increased centralisation of control over curricula, universities and research funding, alongside efforts to constrain academic freedom and public debate, as education systems become key sites for the consolidation of political authority and the reproduction of national identity. At its most extreme, however, the logic of racialised domination that drives the formation's routine epistemic and institutional contestations finds expression in the systematic targeting and destruction of education systems themselves. While settler-colonial elimination operates according to a distinct logic from the ethno-nationalist mobilisation of popular consent that characterises this formation in democratic contexts, both draw on and reproduce the same historically constituted hierarchies of race, ethnicity and civilisational authority, and both function to entrench deeply unequal and racialised regimes of inequality. The sustained and widespread attack on education in Gaza — including the destruction of schools and universities, the killing and displacement of students, teachers and academics, and the collapse of educational infrastructure — has been described as scholasticide: the dismantling of a society's capacity to produce, sustain and transmit knowledge (Desai et al., 2025; Giroux, 2025; Hajir and Qato, 2025; Junina, 2025). Within a broader pattern of violence characterised by UN experts, human rights organisations and legal scholars as constitutive of genocide (UNHCR, 2024; UN, 2024c; ICJ, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024), such destruction is integral to the erosion of the social, cultural and institutional foundations of collective life. Scholasticide can thus be understood as a mechanism through which domination is enacted and consolidated within settler-colonial projects, the most extreme instantiation of a logic of epistemic and institutional control that runs across the formation as a whole (Lemkin, 1944; Wolfe, 2006).

Epistemically, authoritarian nationalism seeks to disarticulate existing regimes of truth. In the US and elsewhere, this is through the delegitimation of expert knowledge, mobilising the language of "fake news" and critiques of "woke" ideology while reconstituting authority around sanctioned national and often religiously inflected narratives (Giroux, 2023; Brown, 2019). In India, curriculum reforms associated with Hindu nationalist politics have sought to recast historical knowledge by marginalising the role of Mughal rule, caste oppression and communal conflict while elevating narratives of civilisational continuity (Jaffrelot and

Schoch, 2021; Batra, 2020; Sarkar, 2021; Anand and Lall, 2022). In parts of the United States and Europe, legislative initiatives have restricted the teaching of systemic racism, gender identity and colonial history, frequently framed as resistance to ideological indoctrination (Apple, 2006; Brubaker, 2017; Giroux, 2023). These epistemic contestations differ in their specific targets and institutional forms across contexts, reflecting the variation in how the formation's racialised and civilisational logic is articulated within different national political economies. Pedagogically, the project tends towards transmissive and disciplinary approaches that emphasise conformity, authority and the reproduction of sanctioned knowledge, marked by tensions between the assertion of epistemic sovereignty and continued dependence on global knowledge systems and infrastructures. While often positioned as a challenge to liberal or technocratic governance, authoritarian nationalism does not dismantle the regimes of inequality it claims to contest but rearticulates them along more explicitly racialised and civilisational lines, foreclosing the democratic and epistemic possibilities that counter-hegemonic projects seek to open.

A third project, state developmentalism, reflects efforts by emerging economies and regional blocs to rearticulate education in line with strategies of economic upgrading and geopolitical repositioning. Rather than a unified formation, it is better understood as a family of related projects whose shared logic lies in the strategic use of state power to direct education towards national and regional development objectives, even as the specific interests, alliances and trajectories involved differ considerably across contexts. It constitutes one pole within the poly-imperial order identified in the conceptual framework, representing not simply an alternative to Western hegemony but a competing set of imperial and developmental formations whose relationships with one another and with the existing global order are themselves contested and uneven.

Materially, state developmentalism is underpinned by public investment, development finance and state-linked capital, including through China's Belt and Road Initiative, which integrates education, infrastructure and geopolitical strategy (King, 2014b; 2014a; Rolland, 2017; Chen, 2018). China's expanding development finance networks reconfigure education within broader connectivity and industrial strategies, operating simultaneously as instruments of accumulation, geopolitical positioning and epistemic influence. The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa represent a distinct but related articulation, aligning skills development, STEM expansion and research capacity with industrialisation objectives (AUC, 2015; AU, 2025) and reflecting efforts by African states to define development trajectories on terms less dependent on Western donor conditionalities. These two formations share a statist developmental logic but differ in their geopolitical positioning, their relationships to global capital and their implications for regimes of inequality within and between countries. National strategies in Rwanda and Ethiopia similarly position higher education and technical training as levers for upgrading within global value chains, while initiatives such as Confucius Institutes illustrate how education is embedded within broader geopolitical strategies combining language education and academic exchange with forms of cultural diplomacy and epistemic influence (Paradise, 2009; Hubbert, 2014).

Within regimes of inequality, disparities are framed primarily in terms of uneven development between and within nations, to be addressed through productivity enhancement and economic growth. This orientation foregrounds class-based and spatial inequalities while often marginalising those associated with gender, ethnicity, indigeneity and epistemic exclusion. While state developmentalism may reduce exposure to market volatility and

reliance on transnational metrics, it does not dismantle regimes of inequality: selective investment can reproduce spatial and institutional stratification, reinforcing durable hierarchies of research capacity and global reputation (Marginson, 2025). Epistemically, the project prioritises scientific, technical and vocational knowledge aligned with economic priorities, often maintaining hierarchical distinctions between forms of knowledge and marginalising Indigenous epistemologies. Pedagogically, it emphasises applied learning and alignment with labour market needs. State developmentalism thus represents an alternative hegemonic formation within the poly-imperial order rather than a counter-hegemonic transformation of underlying regimes of inequality, characterised by tensions between developmental goals and persisting inequality within and across societies (Piketty, 2014; Wade, 2018) and between aspirations for national sovereignty and continued integration within global capitalist and digital systems.

A fourth project, liberal humanist restoration, aims to stabilise and revitalise the existing multilateral settlement. Its material foundations lie in the post-war architecture of Western liberal capitalism: the system of Official Development Assistance, multilateral financing mechanisms and international institutional governance that was constructed to manage the contradictions of capitalist development while securing the conditions for continued accumulation. This architecture is not merely a set of good intentions constrained by circumstances; it is structurally embedded within the political economy of Western capitalism, and its reform agenda operates within limits set by the interests of the donor governments, development banks and private capital fractions that underwrite it. The financing architecture of liberal multilateralism, including ODA structures, GPE conditionalities, the expansion of blended finance and results-based aid, reproduces relations of dependency between high-income donor countries and low-income recipients, constraining the very policy space that reform discourses seek to open (Tikly, 2017; Mundy et al., 2017). These structural constraints are what distinguish liberal humanist restoration from genuinely counter-hegemonic projects. It explicitly highlights issues of inclusion, equity and sustainability, and most directly addresses inequalities related to gender, disability, poverty and epistemic exclusion, but it continues to struggle with the more deeply rooted structural inequalities associated with class, race, ethnicity, coloniality and the global political economy that its own financing architecture helps to reproduce.

Institutionally, it is associated with UNESCO and UNICEF, alongside the European Union, INGOs, national governments and philanthropic foundations, seeking to revitalise multilateral governance through initiatives such as the Transforming Education Summit and the Futures of Education report (United Nations, 2022; UNESCO, 2021c). Epistemically, it promotes inclusive, rights-based and sustainability-oriented approaches, emphasising the recognition of multiple forms of knowledge (Tikly, 2017; 2024b). However, this project is characterised by a persistent tension between its normative commitments and its reliance on governance and financing models that reproduce structural inequalities, often resulting in hybrid configurations that combine progressive discourses with managerial practices (Verger et al., 2018; Mundy et al., 2017). It thus operates as a reformist hegemonic project that seeks to renew legitimacy without fundamentally transforming the structural relations through which inequality is produced.

Alongside these dominant formations, explicitly counter-hegemonic knowledge projects are emerging across multiple scales but remain fragmented and unevenly institutionalised. Materially reliant on precarious resources, grassroots funding and activist networks, and institutionally driven by social movements, community organisations, Indigenous networks

and critical scholars, these projects seek to challenge dominant regimes of truth by foregrounding Indigenous, local and experiential knowledge and contesting the hierarchies that validate and authorise knowledge (Santos, 2012; Tikly, 2019). Pedagogically, they emphasise dialogical, participatory and emancipatory approaches connecting education to broader struggles for social, epistemic and environmental justice across intersecting axes of class, race, ethnicity, gender, indigeneity, disability, sexuality and rurality. Elements of these agendas are selectively adopted by multilateral agencies and philanthropic organisations where they enhance legitimacy, although such adoption is often partial and may dilute more transformative demands (Ball and Olmedo, 2012; Reich, 2018). Their internal dynamics and strategic directions are examined in the subsequent section on critical hope.

The relative influence of these projects mirrors the distribution of power among the interests they are linked to. Technocratic-digital optimisation currently wields the greatest influence, supported by the institutional authority of multilateral organisations, development banks and platform-based corporations. Liberal humanist restoration maintains significant normative presence within multilateral forums but is constrained by its reliance on the same economic frameworks that limit its transformative capacity. State developmentalism has gained influence through the growing geopolitical clout of emerging economies and regional blocs, though its reach remains uneven. Authoritarian nationalism, while influential in specific national settings, rearticulates rather than overcomes existing systems of inequality. Counter-hegemonic projects, though increasingly visible, remain relatively marginal in institutional terms.

Crucially, these projects do not simply coexist as parallel formations but interact and interpenetrate in ways that shape the overall configuration of the field. The relationship between technocratic-digital optimisation and liberal humanist restoration is particularly instructive: the two projects share institutional actors, financing mechanisms and policy networks, and their boundaries are actively contested. It is precisely this overlap that explains why liberal reformism so frequently slides towards managerialism, as the discourse of rights and inclusion becomes operationalised through the very metrics, benchmarking systems and results-based financing that technocratic optimisation relies upon. Authoritarian nationalism, meanwhile, draws on the legitimacy deficits generated by both projects, mobilising popular disaffection with technocratic governance and the perceived cultural impositions of liberal multilateralism. State developmentalism occupies an ambiguous position, partly contesting Western hegemony within the poly-imperial order and partly reproducing its developmental logics under different geopolitical auspices. Understanding these interactions is essential to grasping the dynamics of the post-2030 conjuncture, which is shaped not merely by the competing visions each project advances but by the contradictions generated at the interfaces between them.

A different dynamic is evident in education-in-emergencies contexts such as South Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan and parts of the Sahel, where the alignment between material interests, institutional structures and epistemic frameworks remains weak or fragmented. Education systems in these settings are shaped by overlapping and often conflicting logics of state fragility, humanitarian intervention and donor-driven reform, managed through international agencies, NGOs and short-term funding cycles that produce parallel systems, curricular gaps and uneven governance arrangements (UNESCO, 2023b; Education Cannot Wait, 2023). These cases demonstrate the limitations of hegemonic consolidation and illustrate how, within global regimes of inequality, some education systems are governed by partial,

externally mediated and unstable arrangements in which humanitarian, security and development logics intersect without forming a stable authority structure.

The post-2030 agenda is therefore best understood not as a plurality of competing visions but as a structured and relational terrain of struggle over whether and how regimes of inequality are stabilised, reconfigured or transformed, and over what education is for and whom it ultimately serves.

Critical Hope and the Politics of Counter-hegemonic Rearticulation

If organic crisis denotes structured indeterminacy rather than collapse, it also opens a terrain for strategic rearticulation. As Gramsci observed, such conjunctures generate both defensive consolidation and transformative possibility. Critical hope begins from this tension, combining a pessimism of the intellect grounded in recognition of fiscal constraint, infrastructural capture and geopolitical fragmentation with an optimism of the will oriented towards the construction of alternative alignments (Gramsci, 1971). Within a complex realist ontology, structures condition but do not determine action: the post-2030 moment is neither a routine technocratic transition nor a foreclosed horizon but a contested terrain in which competing knowledge projects seek institutional sedimentation within financing architectures, digital infrastructures and governance frameworks already under strain.

Critical hope has a well-established lineage within critical social theory and education, running from Ernst Bloch's conception of hope as a concrete anticipatory orientation grounded in real historical tendencies (Bloch, 1986) through Paulo Freire's insistence that hope is an ontological necessity linked to praxis (Freire, 1994) and Henry Giroux's and bell hooks' articulation of hope as a political commitment to democratic transformation (Giroux, 2011; hooks, 2003). What this tradition shares is the insistence that hope is neither abstract idealism nor passive expectation but a practice embedded in struggles over material conditions, institutional arrangements and epistemic authority. Within the framework developed here, critical hope is understood as a strategic orientation towards constructing counter-hegemonic knowledge projects capable of rearticulating the relationships between accumulation, legitimacy and social reproduction across the material, institutional, epistemic and pedagogical domains identified earlier. Counter-hegemonic projects differ from alternative hegemonic formations in that they seek not merely to reconfigure existing inequalities but to transform the underlying relations through which they are produced and legitimised, requiring movement beyond critique towards the construction of alternative alignments capable of achieving organisational coherence and institutional durability across scales.

Materially, counter-hegemonic rearticulation requires direct engagement with the political economy of education and its embedding within global capitalism. Sovereign debt burdens, fiscal austerity and constrained public expenditure continue to limit policy space, particularly in the Global South, reinforcing reliance on optimisation strategies and loan-based financing tied to conditionalities (UNCTAD, 2022). Reorienting education towards democratic, inclusive and ecologically sustainable ends, therefore, depends on expanding fiscal space through debt restructuring, progressive taxation and increased concessional finance (Piketty, 2014; Wade, 2018). At the same time, the growing centrality of digital infrastructures introduces new forms of dependency linked to platform capitalism, data extraction and algorithmic governance (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Procurement regimes, interoperability standards and data ownership arrangements shape who controls educational infrastructures

and whose interests they serve (Williamson, 2020; Komljenovic, 2021). Counter-hegemonic strategies must therefore intervene in these domains, promoting digital public goods, data sovereignty and alternative ownership models that redistribute control over infrastructures and mitigate the reproduction of digital inequalities structured along lines of class, race, geography and gender (Kwet, 2019).

Institutionally, critical hope entails transforming governance arrangements across scales, strengthening public education systems, embedding participatory forms of governance and reconfiguring accountability mechanisms so that they are responsive to communities rather than external metrics. At the global and regional levels, it involves contesting the dominance of multilateral technocracy and fostering more equitable forms of cooperation, including South-South collaboration and regional initiatives such as the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa alongside broader frameworks such as Agenda 2063. However, these initiatives cannot be assumed to constitute counter-hegemonic alternatives. Operating within existing regimes of inequality, they may reproduce technocratic, productivist or state-led developmental logics, reconfiguring rather than transforming underlying hierarchies of knowledge, power and resource distribution. In higher education and research, efforts to reshape global knowledge production through equitable partnerships, including those informed by the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations, seek to challenge extractive models and redistribute agenda-setting power (Gebremariam et al., 2023; Aboderin et al., 2023), providing a basis for engaging with inequalities rooted in coloniality and mediated through language, race and epistemic hierarchy. Counter-hegemonic projects must navigate the constraints of the poly-imperial order, diversifying partnerships and building solidaristic alliances while remaining attentive to the ways in which geopolitical positioning shapes the conditions of possibility for institutional transformation.

Epistemically, counter-hegemonic rearticulation involves transforming the regimes of truth that underpin global education policy. Efforts to decolonise curricula, revise dominant historical narratives and incorporate Indigenous, local and experiential knowledge traditions challenge hierarchies of epistemic authority rooted in colonial, racialised histories (Santos, 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2023; Odora Hoppers, 2022), intersecting with broader movements addressing inequalities related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability and indigeneity. Language policy forms a crucial dimension of this struggle: the privileging of dominant global languages, particularly English, continues to structure access to education and research, reinforcing global hierarchies of knowledge production, and promoting multilingual education and valuing African and other local languages are essential to epistemic justice (Barrett et al., 2025; Milligan et al., 2025; Tikly, 2016; 2024a; 2024b). Epistemic transformation must also engage with the infrastructures that govern knowledge, since metrics, indicators, rankings and algorithmic systems shape what counts as valid knowledge and whose knowledge is recognised. Without intervention in the political-economic conditions through which knowledge is produced and validated, including indicator design, data governance and research funding criteria, efforts at epistemic inclusion risk absorption within existing regimes of inequality (Fraser, 2008). The challenge is therefore not only to pluralise knowledge but to redistribute authority over the systems that validate and circulate it.

In contexts of extreme violence, struggles over knowledge become inseparable from the conditions that sustain educational systems and collective intellectual life. Where these conditions are systematically undermined, the destruction of institutions, the displacement of scholars and students, and the loss of educational infrastructure signal not merely disruption

but a profound erosion of a society's capacity to reproduce and renew knowledge (GCPEA, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). As noted in the preceding analysis, the assault on education in Gaza represents the most extreme instantiation of this logic. In such contexts, the limits of approaches to epistemic justice that focus solely on recognition or inclusion become acutely apparent. Counter-hegemonic rearticulation requires not only the transformation of knowledge systems but the defence and reconstructioen of the educational institutions and infrastructures within which knowledge is produced and transmitted. This entails sustained forms of international academic solidarity, including support for displaced scholars, the development of alternative sites and modalities for teaching and research, and coordinated advocacy to safeguard the right to education under conditions of war, occupation and forced displacement (Barakat and Milton, 2015; Milton and Barakat, 2016).

Pedagogically, critical hope is enacted through practices that link learning to broader processes of social transformation and that recognise learners as situated within intersecting structures of inequality. Dialogical, participatory and emancipatory approaches foreground voice, agency and collective inquiry, drawing on traditions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1994; Giroux, 2011), evident in community-based education, participatory research methodologies and pedagogies that engage learners in addressing issues of inequality, discrimination, religious difference and ecological crisis (Tikly et al., 2020; TESF Collective, 2024). These approaches emphasise the co-production of knowledge and the cultivation of critical consciousness across diverse social groups, including those marginalised along axes of class, race, ethnicity, gender, indigeneity, disability, sexuality, rurality and exposure to environmental risk.

Across these domains, the construction of counter-hegemonic knowledge projects depends on the capacity to build alliances across actors and scales. Educators, students, researchers, policymakers, faith-based organisations, community movements and civil society actors all play crucial roles in articulating alternative visions and practices, but their efforts must coalesce into structured projects capable of achieving institutional anchoring. This requires the development of alternative constellations of concepts, indicators, financing strategies and governance arrangements that render alternative futures both intelligible and actionable. As noted in the preceding discussion of knowledge projects, the selective adoption of counter-hegemonic ideas by dominant actors frequently dilutes their transformative content, and maintaining critical reflexivity and organisational autonomy is essential to resisting this incorporation. The need to connect struggles within education to broader movements for social, economic, environmental and epistemic justice follows directly from this (Tikly, 2019; Tikly, 2024a).

Critical hope, then, is not an appeal to moral aspiration detached from material constraint. It is the disciplined construction of alternative articulations across material, institutional, epistemic and pedagogical domains. Whether the structured indeterminacy of the current conjuncture consolidates into intensified metric governance and poly-imperial fragmentation, or opens space for more democratic, pluriversal and ecologically grounded configurations, will depend on the capacity of counter-hegemonic knowledge projects to achieve coherence, scale and durability within an evolving and deeply contested global education policy regime.

Conclusion

As the 2030 deadline approaches, the future of global education governance cannot be understood as a technical extension of SDG 4. It is unfolding amid an ongoing organic crisis

of global capitalism, characterised by fiscal constraint, geopolitical fragmentation, digital consolidation and intensifying contestation over epistemic authority. This crisis does not signal institutional collapse but a condition of structured indeterminacy in which established articulations between accumulation, legitimacy and social reproduction are being destabilised and renegotiated within historically constituted regimes of inequality.

To make sense of this conjuncture, the article has conceptualised global education policy as a multi-scalar regime comprising interlinked material, institutional, epistemic and pedagogical domains, and has traced the historical rearticulations through which the liberal and neoliberal education regime was constructed from 1945 to its consolidation under SDG 4. The crisis of that regime is refracted through four competing knowledge projects: technocratic-digital optimisation, authoritarian nationalism, state developmentalism and liberal humanist restoration. These formations operate not only at the level of discourse but through concrete mechanisms, including indicator regimes, performance-based financing, procurement systems, digital infrastructures and data standards. They do not simply coexist but interact and interpenetrate in ways that shape the overall configuration of the field, generating contradictions at their interfaces that are themselves productive of the instability characterising the post-2030 conjuncture.

At the same time, organic crisis creates openings for transformation. Counter-hegemonic knowledge projects, though fragmented and unevenly institutionalised, are emerging across multiple scales. Their capacity to reshape the emerging settlement depends on moving beyond critique towards the construction of alternative alignments capable of achieving institutional anchoring across material, institutional, epistemic and pedagogical domains. This entails intervening in financing architectures, debt regimes and digital infrastructures; transforming governance arrangements through more democratic and participatory forms of accountability; reconfiguring epistemic authority through curriculum reform, knowledge pluralism and linguistic justice; and advancing pedagogical practices that foreground agency, voice and social transformation. These struggles extend, in extreme contexts, to the defence of education systems themselves, as the processes of scholasticide documented in Gaza underscore the extent to which struggles over education are entangled with broader dynamics of domination and resistance that cannot be addressed through epistemic or institutional reform alone.

The capacity of counter-hegemonic projects to reshape the emerging settlement is constrained by the enduring power of dominant actors to control resources, shape agendas and define legitimate knowledge, and by the recurring tendency of dominant formations to selectively incorporate alternative agendas in ways that enhance legitimacy without transforming underlying logics. The challenge is therefore not only to articulate alternative visions but to embed them within the institutional architectures through which education is governed.

The post-2030 settlement will ultimately crystallise through struggles over those architectures: over what is measured, how finance is allocated, which digital infrastructures mediate governance and whose knowledge carries authority. In this sense, the future of global education governance is not a question of policy design alone but of power. It concerns whose interests are institutionalised, whose knowledge is recognised and whose futures are made possible.

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