International large-scale learning assessments (ILSAs): benefits and risks

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Rationales for (non)participation in international large-scale learning assessments (ILSAs)
Today’s presentation will address

1. What has contributed to the rise of ILSAs;
2. Government rationales for participation in ILSAs;
3. Who else advocates for ILSAs?
4. Government rationales for non-participation in ILSAs or withdrawal;
5. What conclusions does this lead to?
What are these claims based on?

1. LAMP in Laos and Mongolia
2. PISA-D in Ecuador and Paraguay
3. Publications with Sam Sellar (Manchester Metropolitan University) and his research on PISA in the UK and Australia

i. What has contributed to the rise of ILSAs.

- A changing assessment culture – from scepticism and philosophical doubt to statistical certainty;
- Changing modes of governance and increased accountability of the public sector;
- The spread and consolidation of New Public Management reforms;
- Education increasingly framed as an economic resource;
ii. What has contributed to the rise of ILSAs..

• The new conceptual consensus on global development priorities;
• Evidence-based policy and results-based funding schemes;
• A growing learning crisis narrative;
• But there is more...
Governments’ rationales for ILSA participation

• Technical

• Economic

• Political

• Socio-cultural
Technical rationales (i)

• To acquire sophisticated technical capacity required to develop, implement and analyse large-scale assessments;
• To gain access to methodological and conceptual frameworks, but also large-scale assessment software;
• To learn how to shift from curriculum-based to skill-based assessments;
• To substitute non-existent or poor quality national large-scale assessments;
Technical rationales (ii)

‘Look at the case of Guatemala with TERCE [...] They were part of loads of capacity building sessions [...] And then a whole set of things happened with the President and bang! The minister changed and they all left, the whole team was gone.’

Ec2016#38
Technical rationales (iii)

• To legitimize national large-scale assessments;
• To benchmark progress against particular education systems and identify what works;
• In response to the encouragement to develop national large-scale assessments and link them to ILSAs;
• For national experts to have the opportunity to share education assessment and policy expertise.
Technical rationales (iv)

‘The closeness of the national and international assessments will give legitimacy to our national assessment.’ Ec2016#37
Economic rationales (i)

• To measure and predict human capital flows and economic competitiveness;
• To attract domestic and international investors;
• To access international aid through demonstrations of transparency and accountability;
• To mobilize resources for under-resourced institutions or projects.
Economic rationales (ii)

‘A modest goal of having all OECD countries boost their average PISA scores by 25 points over the 20 years ... implies an aggregate gain of OECD GDP of USD 115 trillion over the lifetime of the generation born in 2010 ... Bringing all countries up to the average performance of Finland, OECD’s best performing education system in PISA, would result in gains in the order of USD 260 trillion.’

OECD, 2010, p. 6
Economic rationales (iii)

‘We saw that the Mongolian skills were lower at the end of secondary school, but we need to be like European students. Mongolian students need to be globally competitive. There is huge foreign investment here, investors want to recruit, but our skills are not at level, so we really need to look at where we are in the world.’ Mon2012#20
Political rationales (i)

• To push through reforms, reduce reform pressure and reconcile policy disagreements;
• To win political support and legitimize political agendas;
• Changing policy problematizations and domestic political narratives;
• Demonstrating government accountability and transparency.
Political rationales (ii)

‘We feel we are fighting with the villages, they don’t want to study but we have to achieve our literacy goals by 2014 in a hurry. [...] We will officially declare district by district to have completed Primary NFE by 2014. The President will stand in New York at the United Nations General Assembly and say ‘My country has completed NFE and it is 98% literate’. Lao2012#10
Political rationales (iii)

‘A minister said the best scenario is to take office in the ministry the day after the PISA results and to leave the day before the students take the PISA exams. (...) But we are taking the risk, in other words, we are showing ourselves in the public arena because it is going to be about our administration. The kids who are going to be assessed will have been students during the whole Correa administration period. So if they do not know anything, we have not taught them anything. They cannot blame anyone but us.’

Ec2016#35
Socio-cultural rationales (i)

• As a global ritual of belonging – participating becomes a statement of alignment with the values of the international community (i.e. Conceiving education as a measurable and internationally comparable set of skills) or a mechanism to demonstrate economic or political affiliations;
• Demonstrating internationality and membership in the global education space which PISA has created;
• Peer pressure;
• Obtaining transnational accreditation;
‘It’s as if you have all the freedom in world but with limits, you cannot play that much and these limits are not only OECD-imposed limits, the countries impose them too. You take part in PISA because you want PISA. [...] It cannot reflect my reality much, but I can sacrifice that. [...] And yes, many things countries wanted were omitted. At the end of the day you need to decide what you prefer. And what was preferred was to have a stronger tie with PISA.’ Ec2016#37
Socio-cultural rationales (iii)

‘I don’t think there is any explicit sanction, but there is a connotation that one is outside of something. It’s like the feeling of being auto-excluded. (…) Not being on the information map in the 21st century is unbearable.’ Py2016#45

‘If you don't have data from international assessments, it feels bad and it looks bad, you are just an empty line, it looks like you are not doing anything in education.’ (High income country)
Socio-cultural rationales (iv)

- To gain membership in political, economic or trade entities;
- As signatories to global commitments or as a responsibility in pledged initiatives;
- As a nation-building narrative or to legitimize national existence or to enhance sub-national autonomy;
- To demonstrate promotion from development categories;
- The personal rationales of key decision-makers: intellectual curiosity, professional networking, career building opportunities, international travel, an elite network involving significant opportunity, luxury and prestige.
Socio-cultural rationales (v)

‘The rational for participating is obvious, it is part of the nation building, it was to put Palestine out there, ‘we have LAMP, etc.’ Therefore we must be a country [...] They did it very very quickly, [...] it was part of all of this, it was timed to be part of this.’

UIS2012#2
The rationales of other key actors

• Media, public opinion and special interest groups;
• For ILSA-contracted private companies developing and implementing ILSAs;
• The private sector;
• Bilateral and multilateral donors and development partners;
• Philanthropic foundations;
• International organizations;
• But also civil society coalitions, social movements, professional associations, investors,..
Rationales for non-participation/withdrawal

- **Technical.** Lack of technical capacity, resources, fragile-state status, poor access to students in conflict and disaster affected areas, lack of ownership, good quality data already available.

- **Economic.** Resource-intensive, other educational priorities (i.e. South Africa chose to prioritize NLSA to highlight in country variation);

- **Political.** Valuing local context, diversity and holistic education rather than standardized skills in global rankings, resistance to the overload of international testing, test scores and ILSA impacts on education, embarrassment about low scores/rankings, maintaining legitimacy by not exposing poor results, tensions related to choice and exclusion of testing language/s;

- **Socio-cultural.** Resistance towards instruments seen as not culturally appropriate and culturally relevant, lack of relevance of monolingual instruments in highly multilingual contexts.
What might we conclude...

- The risks of this polyvalence leading to a hegemony of ILSAs;
- Polyvalent but also normative and performative;
- Gorur (2017): ’What kinds of worlds are being brought into being, and what kinds of worlds do we want to create?’
A final consideration on ILSA cost-benefit analysis

• Engel and Rutkowski 2018: a cost-benefit analysis of ILSAs. Is PISA worth the inferences from the data for policy and practice?

• Addey and Sellar 2019: Different perspectives will lead to different estimates of worth. We argue for a broad cost-benefit analysis which includes technical, economic, political and socio-cultural rationales be weighed into the analysis.
That’s all for now!

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