

# Competition, Divergence, and Influence: A Comparison of East Asian Bilateral Institutions and Practices for Educational Development in Cambodia

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## ABSTRACT

Studies of globalization of education typically imbue the target education system with agency. This study seeks to examine the bilateral aid agency actors and their own structures and practices as they might reflect processes of educational globalization in order to examine the two dominant sociological theories in the field of comparative education: Neo-Institutional Theory and Systems Theory. Policy documents, agency official interviews, and project activities were analyzed in Cambodia, as a case study, to test these two theories. It was found that both theories are lacking in their explanatory capabilities. The agencies do not display isomorphic convergence as predicted by Neo-Institutional Theory, and neither are they pre-occupied with preserving their own unique systemic characteristics as would be predicted by Systems Theory. It was discovered that it may be necessary to examine more closely the power relations between both aid donor and recipient nations and how those relations shape the forces which influence their structures and practices.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, development, education, Japan, South Korea, China

## INTRODUCTION

Do East Asian donors compete for influence by conforming to the examples of traditional donors or by creating unique policies and practices for international educational development? This question guided this research project to establish geopolitical influence in relation to development models for education propagated by the countries of East Asia. In this report, I will attempt to examine theories of globalization of education as they might explain the development of bilateral aid agencies in Japan, South Korea, and China and their education projects in the particular development context of Cambodia. These theories are at the center of recent debates in comparative education about which sociological theories can best describe the globalization trends and potential future directions of global education policies and practices. This study will compare government institutions within East Asia (e.g., JICA) in their roles to promote educational expansion or

“Education for All” (EFA) around the world with a focus on a single nation case-study: Cambodia. The researcher will attempt to determine whether “Asian” institutions are following the development policies of “Western” institutions or establishing new “Asian” or “Japanese” models for education and national development. In doing so, this study will point out flaws in the dominant sociological theories regarding globalization of education.

## BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The assumption has often been made that bilateral aid agencies are idiosyncratic in their nature and there is little influence between bilateral agencies in different countries. However, in the same vein that domestic institutions such as ministries of education have been

studied as cases of isomorphism, there is value in comparing the development of bilateral aid agencies in searching for cases of convergence or divergence. Comparatively, there have been a number of studies done on the role of international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank for the promotion of Education for All globally (Mundy, 1999; Heyneman, 2003). Other studies have addressed the role of multilateral agencies in Cambodia such as the World Bank and UNICEF (Hattori, 2009) and UNESCO (Dy and Ninomiya, 2003) in Cambodia. Some researchers have examined the bilateral aid of Japan (Kamibeppu, 2002, King and McGrath, 2002) or China (Gillespie, 2002) for education on a global scale. However, there is a void in the research literature which does not address the historical development of bilateral aid agencies in Asia in relation to those of "The West" and the future of bilateral aid for education. The researcher's previous JSPS Research Grant focused on the role of Japan, South Korea, and China in the development of education in Cambodia. This study will expand on that study to compare EFA Policy of "emerging donors" in Asia such as Japan, South Korea, and China with traditional donors. This study will situate the research on Asian and Western bilateral aid institutions within the central debate about globalization of education in the fields of educational sociology and comparative education today. On the one hand, Neo-Institutionalist scholars contend that a "world culture" represented by international organizations promotes convergence of common values of "progress" and "justice" to expand education in nations across the globe (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Neo-institutionalist would expect bilateral aid agencies in different countries to display isomorphic characteristics which would only increase in similarity over time. On the other hand, Systems Theorists argue that the "policy talk" of education policy exists as discourse which displays divergence in the way it is translated into different education practices in each national and cultural context (Schriewer, 2003; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Researchers in Anthropology and Cultural Studies insist that we must focus on processes of "indigenization" or "creolization" of global discourse and practice at the local level (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Appadurai, 1990). There is room to suggest that other theories within sociology or other academic disciplines may be more promising in their potential to explain the development of bilateral aid agencies and globalization of institutions, policies, and practices.

Previous studies led by Neo-Institutionalist researchers have examined the presence of ministries of education around the world as evidence of institutional isomorphism (i.e., convergence) (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Other studies have focused on the role that international organizations play in the process of globalization and convergence of world culture (Chabbott, 2009). However, there have not been any comparative studies of government institutions which promote education in foreign nations and their role in educational expansion.

Furthermore, previous studies have only stated that ministries of education are similar in that they exist in different nations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Very little attention has been paid to the internal characteristics or sub-systems present in those institutions or any rigorous analysis of how they behave in terms of policy-making or project implementation. This study compares those institutions in the "emerging" and "traditional" donor nations of Asia and "The West" to investigate the degree to which the newer "emerging" donor agencies pursue policies which "converge" with the policies of the "traditional" donor agencies. The comparison will focus on three nations in Asia (Japan, South Korea and China) in order to broaden the examination of convergence or divergence of educational development policy in Cambodia as these global policies and practices are experienced by local stakeholders in education.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine a greater question at the center of the current debate in the fields of educational sociology and comparative education as reflected in the research question below. The research question which guides this study is stated as, "Do government institutions (JICA, KOICA, etc.) in Asia converge or diverge in their policies and practices for the global expansion of education?" Several questions must be addressed to approach this topic. Do Asian institutions converge with Western institutions? Are Asian institutions creating a new "Asian Model" for education in developing nations? Is each Asian nation creating its own unique models (i.e., a "Japanese Model", "Chinese Model") for education in developing nations? The study will seek to reveal the following: the influence of global and local forces on the creation of bilateral aid agencies, the degree of EFA policy consensus between traditional Western donors, and in what ways emerging bilateral aid agencies converge or diverge with this consensus. Further efforts will be made to identify models which may be defined as being uniquely Japanese, Korean, Chinese, or East Asian. This study will focus on three aspects of bilateral education aid for educational expansion: institutions, policies, and human resources (practitioners and stakeholders). During the first stage, the researcher examined the historical origins of the bilateral aid institutions (e.g., JICA or KOICA) and their policies for "Education for All" (EFA). During the second stage, the researcher investigated the human element by analyzing the understanding of recent EFA policies by both agency officers (i.e., practitioners) and stakeholders. The researcher collected first and second-hand resources to describe the origins of the bilateral agencies. These documents were procured through the researcher's contacts with bilateral agencies in Asia, the US, and Europe. The documents were subjected to a historiographic analysis to determine whether institutions

have global origins, local origins, or some combination of the two. In the second policy analysis stage, the researcher collected all policy documents relevant to ODA for Education for All from the bilateral agencies. These documents were accessible through the researcher's contacts or in policy document archives such as those found in UNESCO's Institute of International Education Planning. The documents were subjected first to a policy analysis according to the principles laid out in Bardach (2008). This policy analysis focused on the policy as it benefits both the donor and the stakeholders as an element of the country-wide movement for education for all. The researcher subjected the policy documents to further analysis to discuss the policies as they exhibit convergence or divergence of policy priorities related to Education for All. In the second phase of the field research, interviews were conducted with bilateral agency experts both in the headquarters of the agencies and in their field offices in Cambodia. Experts were interviewed to ascertain their knowledge of policy priorities both in relation to education policies and projects and the overall mission of their agency in developing nations globally and particularly for the Cambodian case. Interviews were also conducted with local partners of education development experts. Respondents were asked to list the policy priorities of the bilateral aid agency with which they have worked. Responses were compared with those of practitioners to examine cases of coordination versus disconnect or miscommunicated policy priorities. The researcher analyzed all historical documents, policy documents, and interview transcripts, according to the following process. A comprehensive conceptually-clustered data matrix was used to compile and organize data as themes emerged (Miles & Huberman 1994). "Data reduction" was performed to identify emerging themes and "constant comparison" was used to check the validity of those themes (Marshall and Rossman 1989; Lecompte and Preissle 1993). Thereby, a theoretical framework can be chosen to describe the findings per "theory implications selection" (Lecomte and Preissle 1993). As such, the discourse was deconstructed as it relates to the wider EFA movement versus donor-specific political priorities.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Previous articles produced from this study presented findings which illustrated the convergence and divergence of the institutions, policies, and practices related to educational development in Cambodia of Japan, South Korea, and China. In doing so, this study offers an important data set which can be used to examine and test the premises regarding globalization of education presented by the two main theoretical schools in comparative education and sociology of education: Neo-institutional Theory and Systems Theory. On the one hand, Neo-institutionalist scholars contend that a "world culture" represented by

international organizations promotes convergence of common values of "progress" and "justice" to expand education in nations across the globe (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). On the other hand, Systems Theorists argue that the "policy talk" of education policy exists as discourse which displays divergence in the way it is translated into different education practices in each national and cultural context (Schriewer, 2003; SteinerKhamsi, 2004).

The unique contribution of this study is to examine the creation of education bilateral aid agencies in these three nations of East Asia in comparison to discuss how these theories fare in describing their creation, development, and institutionalization. In previous studies, the creation of ministries of education has been examined in a similar vein, but this study is the first to examine the bilateral aid agencies for education. Secondly, the study seeks to compare the policies and practices, or in this case projects, of each nation's aid agency to extrapolate to what degree the agencies seem to be formulating both policies and practices to converge with other East Asian nations or Western traditional donors which represent the reference societies described by Schriewer (2003). Based on the data generated from interviews, observation and document analysis, a picture should emerge of how bilateral agencies in each nation develop in comparison to partner organizations in other East Asian nations.

On a superficial level, agency officers speak of great similarities between JICA and KOICA. A JICA official stated that "Overall KOICA seems very similar...the way it focuses on the same sectors such as science and math education and technical education" (JICA). JICA officials refer to other shared practices such as sending volunteers to universities and teacher training centers. KOICA officials corroborate some of the statements by JICA saying that "KOICA is obviously modeled after JICA" (KOICA). However, these statements gloss over some fundamental differences in that both JICA and KOICA establish unique projects and claim that their projects are reflections of domestic educational "best practices" which have contributed toward the development of their respective countries. KOICA describe the creation of a technical high school in Cambodia with great pride and hold high hopes for the potential success of such a model in Cambodia. Japanese JICA officials and consultants point to the long-standing success of "lesson study" (*jyugyo kenkyu*) teacher training practices and their suitability for developing nations. The picture that emerges of these nations' projects is that their purpose is two-fold. First, they must compete with other bilateral agencies for relevance and influence by establishing a unique and national identity for their agency and the projects it implements. Second, they use these "unique" models and "best practices" as they are not only effective models but project a positive image of each nation's soft power (Nye, 2009).

If the Neo-institutionalist premise is accepted that all developed nations which become donors will create their own bilateral aid agency, then how do we explain the lack

of such an agency in China? It is telling that Ministry of Commerce has purveyed over the bilateral aid initiatives of the Chinese government. However, the lack of a JICA-like institution shows that China is diverging from the common pattern of creating such institutions once a nation passes from developing to developed nation status. Officials from both Japan and South Korea expressed some consternation with the manner by which China conducts its development policy in Cambodia. A JICA official referred to "China...trying to hide its projects, but there is some lack of transparency" (JICA). Officials from other countries were concerned about this divergent path that China pursues. However, despite the fact that a JICA official stated that China does not attend donor coordination meetings, in the last year, they have begun to observe such meetings. Does this indicate that China will take more account of other donors' policies and projects for education development in Cambodia? Will China begin to actively participate in donor coordination meetings? Will China eventually create a bilateral aid agency within the Chinese government instead of relying on the Ministry of Commerce? It is not possible to assess these future developments, so we must view China as pursuing its own independent approach. Both Japan and South Korea are concerned about the sizeable influence which China brings to bear in Cambodia as it reflects their regional influence in Southeast Asia, and both nations are concerned with having no way to bring China into the fold, perhaps in terms of China's belonging to the OECD's Donor Assistance Committee, and being unable to counter the influence of China in the region. At the same time, Japan and South Korea seem to express that Sector Wide Approaches to development of the education sector in Cambodia are not so congenial and cooperative as they might be described by UN officials and other participants. East Asian donors expressed some concern that traditional donors still seem to possess significant influence due to their significant aid portfolios as well as the way that Western donors seem to partner more readily than Asian donors. A JICA official referred to the "strong opinions" of the EU and SIDA, implying that the opinions of Japan and other nations were not given much attention. Thus one can see that there is a rather contentious relationship between the bilateral aid agencies which inhabit the donor community in Cambodia. These agencies compete for influence in various ways. Unsurprisingly, the largest donors in different sectors claim premier positions in aid policy councils; however, this is not to say that the pecking order is determined solely by economic power. Soft power is evident as well in the sense that nations with education systems that are strong in mathematics and science can serve as reference systems based on international comparative studies of academic achievement such as the OECD's PISA study. PISA rankings and other portrayals of education systems allow these bilateral agencies to make self-referencing claims that their own systems are unique, superior, and best suited for adoption or adaptation by the Cambodia

government.

The donor landscape in Cambodia makes for an interesting community within which agencies must cooperate and coordinate their activities on the surface while politically competing for status and influence in their relations with the Cambodian government. It would be too easy to state that this divergence in the name of seeking competitive advantage refutes the isomorphic proposition posited by Neo-Institutional researchers of globalization of education, and instead the Systems theorists are right in claiming that bilateral agencies will seek to establish their own unique identity through self-referencing practices referring to their educational practices, traditions, and history of educational development. In reality, the creation of bilateral aid agencies is simply overtly conscious of the structure and priorities of agencies in neighboring countries which compete for influence in Asia. Therefore, these education systems and aid organs are not blind to the activities of other nations around them and are, in fact, in open competition with those foreign institutions. This study has hopefully contributed to the understanding of the positioning of bilateral aid agencies and can shift direction to attempt to identify or create new theoretical constructs which better explain the relationships between bilateral aid agencies in their interaction with a national education system like the one in Cambodia and relations with competing for regional powers in East Asia. With the rise of global powers in Asia, it will be vital to understand the roles of bilateral aid agencies in promoting these Asian models for national development. It will also be important to re-examine the role of international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank vis-à-vis the bilateral agencies to envision how multilateral and bilateral aid agencies can coordinate aid for sustainable development of education and society in the generations to come.

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