

Power, Politics, and Higher Education in Southern Africa: International Regimes, Local Governments, and Educational Autonomy by José Cossa. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008. 226 pp. ISBN 9781604975154.

For more than 15 years, expanding student access to basic education has been identified by many countries as among their highest priorities. Revised timelines by 155 countries aim to achieve universal primary education (UPE) by 2015, and UPE is included as one of the United Nations' eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For African countries, however, this focus has meant a significant decline in attention given to promoting higher education, particularly in funding for national universities. Many international donors involved in applying MDGs for UPE tell countries that they must choose primary education funding above all other levels. Despite this commitment, primary education remains underfunded, clearly showing that governments do not have enough money for either primary or higher education, much less both.

Consequently, José Cossa's *Power, Politics, and Higher Education in Southern Africa* represents a welcome addition to an area of research that is severely lacking. Cossa's aim is to analyze the interaction between African universities and the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade and Services (WTO/GATS), specifically "those concerns that relate to the conceptualization, interpretations, assumptions, and power relations manifest in the interaction" (p. 4). In light of the WTO's stance on economic liberalization and its impact on higher education policy across the continent, Cossa focuses on the Association of African Universities (AAU) and draws on AAU documents to highlight their concerns. Specifically, he cites one AAU source concerned that integration of the WTO will intensify external forces to the detriment of internal decision-makers and that profit may become the priority rather than national development, especially for institutions that are struggling financially.

To articulate the complexities of interactions between global and international regimes, Cossa analyzes their power dynamics through conceptual, qualitative, and quantitative analysis in interviews with employees from representatives from global international organizations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations, and international organizations which operate on a regional levels, specifically the Southern African Development Community, the African Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Non-Allied Movement. These interviews cover issues of power affecting these donor organizations and African national governments, specifically hermeneutical, informational, manipulative, monetary, and regulatory powers.

From the existing literature and these methods, Cossa gathers a number of useful findings in understanding power dynamics between regional (RIR) and

global international regimes (GIR) with regard to higher education policies. He finds that both RIRs and GIRs downplay the role of hermeneutical power—“an interpreter’s proximity to the authorial content of a given agreement” (p. 94)—in negotiations, undermining “the fact that the closer a party is to the spirit of the text when establishing an agreement, the more likely they are to catch the nuances and implications of such an agreement” (p. 153-4). Informational power, the ability to create and distribute “true and valuable information” (p. 94), is more valued by GIRs, meaning that RIRs undercut the fact that the more active an organization is in creating an agreement, the more likely it will participate in its implementation. Both value manipulative power, the ability to “persuade another to adopt a perception and behavior that benefits the persuader” (p. 94), highlighting that negotiations are characterized by submission strategies for personal gain in the absence of transparency. RIRs place greater value on monetary power, showing that they understand that power is with the donor during the negotiation process. Finally, both value regulatory power in international negotiations, which Cossa defines as “the ability to make rules or give directives that are at least perceived as binding” (p. 94). From this last finding, Cossa concludes that GIR respondents believe that, due to power imbalances, using GIR regulations to supervise is best. RIR respondents, however, argue that moderate government regulations are better equipped to monitor the process.

The greatest strength of Cossa’s book is the human face he offers international donors. Seldom are national, regional, or global international regimes given space that highlights individual perspectives. Interview excerpts from regime representatives reveal compassionate views towards the situation of loan recipients, a trait rarely associated with such organizations. Development scholars and practitioners often hold negative perceptions of these organizations because of their experience and records of accomplishment in development projects. These groups are typically viewed as a hegemonic conglomerate with little regard for the very real on-ground impact of their loans, conditionalities, and policy choices. Yet Cossa provides interview data to show that the opposite is in fact true. The human side of these organizations is particularly striking in the discussion on manipulative power. As one interviewee explained:

I worry when I encounter clients, when I encounter stakeholders of higher education that they perceive me or the institution as an institution that is coming to talk to them to pressure them in any way . . . I have yet to open my mouth yet they made a preconceived notion of why I am there and a lot of times I find that we have spent a great deal of effort to help people understand that we are not there to tell them what to do. (p. 128)

In addition to shining a much-needed spotlight on higher education, humanizing donors helps to improve the relationship between donor and recipient, which may ultimately help thaw those distrustful interactions.

Despite these positives, the text suffers from a number of failings. The lack of comment from anyone representing a tertiary institution leaves a serious gap in the research on higher education, especially research focusing on educational autonomy. While the premise for the study and literature review situates them in the African context, Cossa offers little other than general findings. For example, he provides background for Mozambique, but none of the research, conclusion, or implications relates directly to the Mozambican context. The text better addresses the workings of international donors than of higher education in southern Africa. Cossa tends to overuse unnecessary acronyms and technical jargon, which can be confusing and creates a rather scattered argument. Finally, he makes a particularly confusing statement: “While I preach that teaching critical thinking is controversial practice because one who is taught how to critically think ceases to think critically...” (p. 16). This statement certainly requires further explanation as it seems to comment on the practice of critical pedagogy without elaborating on why the author has come to such a conclusion.

Despite these criticisms, the overall argument of *Power, Politics, and Higher Education in Southern Africa* is valuable in that it highlights the role of relationship in the neo-liberal economy in which African higher education institutions operate under the WTO/GATS. The complexities of the interactions between donors and higher education have received little attention, possibly even less than higher education in Africa. Providing perspective from the other side of the negotiating table can only strengthen the conversation and improve what is communicated and how, ultimately improving the outcome in favor of compromise between two seemingly polarized entities. While Cossa’s conclusions are not necessarily deliberately optimistic, this work offers promise for power dynamics between regional and global international regimes and an alternative to assumptions currently governing these relationships.

Reviewer

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