

Analysis of the local adaptation of UNESCO's education equity policy: A comparative case study of China and Nigeria based on global governance theory

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Abstract. This study explores why UNESCO has achieved different results in promoting education equity in various countries. This study uses a comparative case study approach to analyze why China demonstrates effective implementation while Nigeria has challenges in policy implementation from the perspective of global governance theory. The study focuses on the impact of political, economic, and cultural factors on implementing international education policies. UNESCO's success in China depends on China's centralized governance, continued economic growth that has led to increased investment in education, a cultural concept of education priority, and legislative protection. In contrast, UNESCO's limited effectiveness in Nigeria is mainly due to Nigeria's federal system, which leads to decentralized power, an unstable oil economy, systemic corruption, and cultural norms related to religion that affect educational access. This study uses a mixed-methods approach. This method combines quantitative data (e.g., enrollment rates, GDP ratios) with qualitative analysis (e.g., policy adaptation, cultural integration) to provide a new perspective on the adaptability of international education policies in different countries. The results provide practical suggestions for international organizations such as UNESCO. International organizations need to formulate policies that are suitable for local conditions. Meanwhile, international organizations will achieve better results when collaborating with national governments to implement policies. This study highlights the complexity of international policy adaptation and enriches the understanding of global education governance.

Keywords: UNESCO, Educational Equity, Policy Implementation, Governance Capacity, Comparative case study.

1. Introduction

1.1 UNESCO and education

Since the 20th century, many international organizations have influenced social development, including UNESCO, the backbone of the United Nations system [6]. UNESCO is also known as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. According to UNESCO, its primary mission is to promote education, science, culture, and communication to strengthen shared humanity [10].

Education is a fundamental right of every individual, and its importance cannot be overstated [7]. Therefore, as a specialized agency, UNESCO's main task is to promote education. Moreover, UNESCO considers a good education integral to overall social development [11]. UNESCO sees education as the total process of developing human abilities and behaviors. It is an organized and sustained instruction designed to communicate a combination of knowledge, skills, and understanding valued for all life activities. A man can use education to solve problems, improve his life, and make it comfortable [3].

1.2 The importance of educational equity

In the process of promotion, UNESCO gradually discovered that the elite of a country can often receive high-quality education, or that the citizens of developed countries generally receive high-quality education. On the other hand, people in underdeveloped areas often receive poor-quality education, and many have not received any education [8]. If this continues, the educational gap

between people will widen, further away from the shared humanity advocated by UNESCO. Therefore, the current focus in education in recent years is on promoting educational equity [9].

Education is an essential factor in promoting national development. Many countries have made efforts to ensure educational equity. Thus, several educational policies have been made, including Education for All (EFA) by 2015 [2]. Therefore, this study examines the situation and results of UNESCO's promotion of educational equity in different countries.

1.3 Research question

It is a well-established fact that the world comprises diverse countries. These countries are different in politics, economy, and culture. Therefore, UNESCO will achieve different results in promoting educational equity in various countries. Thus, this study raises the following research question: Why has UNESCO achieved outstanding results in promoting educational equity in some countries, but repeatedly encountered difficulties in others? What are the reasons for such differences in different countries?

Within this context, the present study employs a case study approach to analyze a country where UNESCO has done a good job promoting educational equity and a country where UNESCO has difficulty. Through comparison, readers can experience the difficulty of UNESCO in promoting educational equity in different countries.

1.4 Comparative analysis of two nations

China is a positive example among these countries because it started cooperation with UNESCO early and actively carried out two-way interaction. Nigeria has become a negative example because of insufficient government funding, low teacher quality, and outdated teaching facilities and environment.

1.5 Significances

1.5.1 Theoretical significance

This study aims to fill the theoretical gap in the existing literature on comparing the policy implementation effects of international organizations in different countries. It also seeks to build an analytical framework for interacting with international organizations and countries. It uses global governance theory to explain the relationship between nations and policy adaptability.

1.5.2 Practical significance

This research provides empirical suggestions for UNESCO to adjust its global education governance strategy. Additionally, this research provides a reference for developing countries to improve the performance of education policies.

1.6 Innovation Points

First, this study introduces global governance theory into the study of education equity policy. It analyzes the interactive relationship between UNESCO (as an international organization) and countries. It explores the implementation effects of global policies in different countries. This perspective is rare in existing education equity research and paves the way for new avenues of inquiry for the application of theory in the field of education. It fills the gap in related research.

Second, by comparing China and Nigeria, this study reveals the impact of national internal factors (such as politics, economy, and culture) on the effects of international education policies. It breaks through the limitations of single-factor analysis. This comparison highlights diversity in the formulation of global policies. It also provides a basis for understanding the complexity of global education governance.

Third, this study employs a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative data and qualitative analysis. This method breaks through the traditional research method. It deeply explores the impact of national internal factors on the effects of international policies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Existing Literature Review

Since its establishment, UNESCO has always regarded educational equity as its core mission. UNESCO has promoted the goal of "leaving no one behind" in documents such as the "Education 2030 Framework for Action" and the "New Social Contract for Education" [8] [10]. Meanwhile, UNESCO promotes global educational equity through the "Education for All" (EFA) Declaration [2] [8].

Early studies focused on the dissemination of UNESCO policies, such as the localization of the "Education for All" (EFA) initiative in developing countries [1] [2]. However, global education governance is characterized by profound complexity. It was owing to substantial disparities in socioeconomic contexts, cultural values, and political systems. Scholars have gradually discovered significant regional differences in the implementation of international policies. China cooperates with UNESCO to increase the popularization rate of basic education. However, countries such as Nigeria are facing the dilemma of unbalanced allocation of fiscal resources, which makes it difficult to implement policies [1] [12] [18].

Existing literature explains this difference from three dimensions:

2.1.1 Political factors

Whether UNESCO policies can be implemented depends on the ability of the national government to execute them. For instance, China's centralized system ensures policy execution, such as long-term support for UNESCO secondary centers [4]. Nigeria's federal system is decentralized [3] [5].

2.1.2 Economic foundation

Education investment is closely related to financial structure. China's education expenditure as a percentage of GDP increased from 1.2% in 1989 to 4% in 2022, forming a virtuous cycle from economic growth to education investment [15] [18]. In contrast, Nigeria's single reliance on the oil economy has made its finances very fragile. The country's education budget is tiny. Therefore, it is far lower than the number recommended by UNESCO [1] [16].

2.1.3 Cultural influence

Half of Nigerians believe in Islam, which hinders female enrollment. Meanwhile, the decentralized tribal interests in Nigeria weaken the inclusiveness of education policies [17] [20]. In contrast, Chinese Confucian culture attaches great importance to the role of education. Moreover, China passed the "Compulsory Education Law" many years ago to ensure educational equity. These methods offer social support and legal guarantees for implementing UNESCO policies [11] [19].

2.2 Reasons for China and Nigeria are typical cases

Compared with developed countries, the work of developing countries in promoting educational equity is less systematic. Therefore, studying UNESCO's promotion of educational equity in developing countries is more valuable. This can provide more practical experience for international organizations to promote educational equity in developing countries in the future. China and Nigeria are both developing countries. As a developing Asian country, China has made remarkable achievements in improving national education in recent decades.

Meanwhile, China is a rapidly developing economy, so it can be studied as a positive case. Nigeria is a developing country in Africa, but it relies solely on the oil economy. Thus, it is highly representative to study it as a developing country in Africa.

3. Framework

3.1 Global governance theory

Global governance theory emphasizes that international organizations help countries through policy formulation and resource allocation (Rosenau, 1992). As a core international organization in education, UNESCO's policies (such as EFA and SDG4) constitute norms for global education governance to a certain extent. However, the implementation of norms depends on the governance capacity of the country concerned (Weiss & Hobson, 2015). The adaptability of international policies in different countries is different. For instance, China has achieved the coordination of policy goals and local agendas by incorporating UNESCO's "Healthy Rural Education" project into the national poverty alleviation strategy [11]. However, Nigeria's governance difficulties are due to its system, and its policies are only superficial. The corresponding funds are also misappropriated due to corruption [13].

Whether international policies are effective depends on the following three dimensions of national governance. The first is political factors. A country's centralized or decentralized governance structure affects the effectiveness of international policy implementation. (Weiss & Hobson, 2015). The second is economic factors. A country's finances and resource allocation affect its funding in the field of education. (Stiglitz, 2002). The third is cultural factors. Whether international policies are consistent with local cultural values is also important. (Fukuyama, 2004). Therefore, this study proposes the following framework in Figure 1:

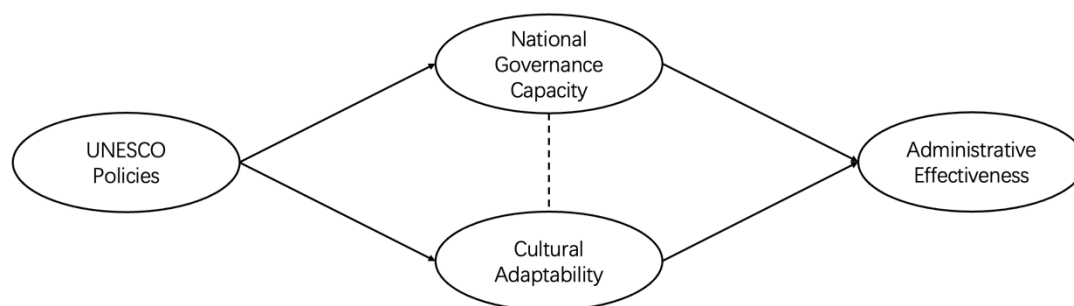


Figure 1. Research Framework

3.1.1 International policy

Taking UNESCO's goal of "education equity" as its core, the policy framework encompasses financial support, technical assistance, and standard setting.

3.1.2 National governance capacity

For instance, the centralization system versus the federal decentralization system at the institutional level, education expenditure and economic structure at the fiscal level, and executive power and integrity at the administrative level.

3.1.3 Cultural Adaptability

There is social and cultural adaptability, such as the impact of religious gender and values on policy implementation.

3.1.4 Administrative effectiveness

It is measured through various quantitative data, such as enrollment rates.

3.2 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach to analyze the difficulty of implementing UNESCO's international education policy in different countries. This study combines quantitative metrics and qualitative contextual analysis to enhance the rigor of the analysis.

Quantitative data, including enrollment rates, education expenditure as a percentage of GDP, and economic growth trends, are drawn from sources such as the World Bank [18], China's Ministry of Education [19], CEIC Data [13], and UNESCO reports [1, 20]. This would provide a more precise measure of the effectiveness of policy implementation in different cases.

Complementing this, qualitative analysis examines policy (e.g., UNESCO's Education for All framework [2] [8], China's Compulsory Education Law [11], and Nigeria's Universal Primary Education policy [2]), governance structures [3] [5], and cultural norms [11] [17]. Qualitative analysis provides a path to study the impact of politics, economics, and culture on policy implementation.

This study analyzes specific cases to provide an analysis of the implementation of educational equity in a country. After obtaining a broad understanding, it is supported by data to provide a more thorough understanding of the situation. The integrated approach bridges the gap between data and national context, providing a comprehensive understanding of the different outcomes of UNESCO's promotion of education equity policies in China and Nigeria.

4. Research gaps

Although the existing literature reveals the influencing factors, these studies lack a systematic theoretical framework. There is a need for further exploration of the interrelationship between UNESCO's policies and national governance. Current scholarly research predominantly focuses on single-country cases or individual policy domains, often neglecting cross-national comparisons and interdisciplinary policy linkages. In addition, applying global governance theory in education is still in its infancy. Although UNESCO emphasizes "multilateral cooperation", few studies have analyzed the adaptability of national internal institutions and international policies from the perspective of governance effectiveness [6] [4].

This study attempts to fill this gap by comparing China (a successful case) and Nigeria (a challenging case) to construct a reasonable analytical framework. Furthermore, this study reveals the reasons for the differentiated effects of international education policies.

5. Case of Educational Equity in China

5.1 Background

China is the world's largest developing country. Since 1989, its GDP Annual Growth Rate has averaged 8.78 percent [14]. Meanwhile, China is close to authoritarianism. It has demonstrated the executive power and positive interaction with UNESCO. Thus, China's practices are essential to global governance research.

Historically, it has been assumed that China's cooperation with UNESCO has not been long-lasting. Within UNESCO, China has positioned itself as a major donor and influential country since 2015, moving away from its earlier role as a champion of developing countries [5]. In fact, UNESCO has cooperated with China a long time ago in educational equity.

5.2 UNESCO's Cooperation with China

5.2.1 UNESCO's Early Initiation in China

First, China has many pioneering cases, which provide valuable references for future generations. One notable case is in health education from 1945 to 1950. This was also when China transitioned from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China. This serves as an illustrative case of achieving educational equity by providing health education in rural areas, which are defined as

underdeveloped areas in China. The rural literacy rate increased from 10% to 35% between 1945 and 1950 [12]. UNESCO aims to promote global peace and development through education, eliminate illiteracy, promote public health, provide civic education, and improve people's livelihoods. UNESCO launched its first flagship education project in China, the Basic Education Program. This Chinese experiment in mass education later became a model for global application. Although the project had limited direct impact, it influenced UNESCO's subsequent initiatives in underdeveloped regions and set a model for education-driven community development [12].

During UNESCO's basic education project in China from 1945 to 1950, as mentioned above, China's material conditions and technology were not developed at that time, and the audience was also extremely underdeveloped, with a target population having high illiteracy rates. UNESCO drew on early international public health experience, including the Rockefeller Foundation and the League of Nations Health Organization (LNHO). They used visuals and simple materials to teach villagers basic hygiene and medical knowledge. They incorporated traditional Chinese culture into the visual materials to better resonate with the audience. The most noteworthy thing is the "Health Calendar", which combines the lunar and Gregorian calendar systems to adapt to rural customs and reflects the changes in measures due to China's national conditions. This personalized adjustment also shows UNESCO's respect for the diversity of the world's ethnic groups [11]. This case demonstrates that UNESCO has been promoting educational equity in China for a long time. Currently, China's primary school net enrollment rate has exceeded 99.7% [19].

5.2.2 UNESCO's Intensive Engagement with China

UNESCO's success in promoting educational equity in China is reflected in its early start and in-depth interaction with both sides.

UNESCO has established 15 Category II centers in China, including rural and higher education [4]. These centers have played a decisive role in promoting educational equity in China.

Moreover, the strong mutual interaction between China and UNESCO also benefits the advancement of the task of educational equity. Productive power revolves around the constitution of subjects through systems of knowledge and social practices. Within UNESCO, China has made sustained contributions to meaning-making processes.” [5] Therefore, China's active interaction with UNESCO, regardless of its intentions, has dramatically helped UNESCO in promoting educational equity in China.

5.3 Analysis of Educational Equity in China

5.3.1 Political factor

China's centralized system has strong enforcement power over policies, such as long-term and stable cooperation with UNESCO Category II Centers with the government's support [4]. Meanwhile, education indicators are essential to the Chinese central government's assessment of local government performance.

5.3.2 Economic factor

China has accumulated strong fiscal capacity since the Reform and Opening-up (Gǎi Gé Kāi Fàng). Therefore, education investment has continued to grow, with an annual growth rate of 8.5% from 1990 to 2020. Along with this growth, China's education expenditure as a percentage of GDP has also increased. According to data from the World Bank, the proportion has jumped from 1.2% in 1989 to 4% in 2022 [18]. Meanwhile, China is gradually developing the integration of industry, academia, and research [15]. Thus, China fosters a virtuous cycle where the economy and education reinforce each other. The cycle drives to sustainable growth.

5.3.3 Cultural factor

From a cultural perspective, the fact that UNESCO can smoothly implement educational equity policy in China is also closely related to Chinese culture. For instance, Confucian culture advocates the importance of education. Concurrently, the Chinese people are very willing to accept integrating

traditional Chinese culture into education policies. For example, the "Healthy Calendar" combines lunar calendar customs [11]. Simultaneously, China has essentially guaranteed educational equity through legislation. Gender discrimination is clearly prohibited in China's "Compulsory Education Law".

6. Case of Educational Equity in Nigeria

6.1 Background

6.1.1 General educational background

Consider, for instance, Nigeria—a nation situated in West Africa—where UNESCO faces notable challenges in education equity. Nigeria is a representative of resource-based countries in Africa. It faces the issue of insufficient governance capacity and represents countries with structural difficulties. Much of the Nigerian population is literate, and the rate for men is higher than for women. Many Nigerian children are not in school [20]. Notably, Nigeria has also attempted to achieve educational equity under a UNESCO-led project. “In 1990, Nigeria joined other countries, agencies, and organizations such as UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), UNICEF, and the World Bank in adopting Education For All (EFA).” Nigeria has launched a project called Universal Primary Education (UPE). [2]

6.1.2 Educational funding background

6.1.2.1 Inadequate Funding

Numerous approaches exist to promoting educational equity. Increasing financial allocations is essential. UNESCO declared a benchmark of at least 26% of public education expenditure [1]. Unfortunately, although Nigeria is a member of UNESCO, its education funding is far from enough. In this situation, Nigeria has a significant challenge in promoting educational equity. Despite being a member of UNESCO, Nigeria has historically allocated below 6% of its budget to education since the UNESCO Declaration of 1990 [1].

6.1.2.2 Corruption

Another case occurred in 2019. The elected members of the 9th National Assembly, inaugurated in June 2019, will be spending over N300 billion (approximately 2 million US dollars) on their welfare, while the total budgeted amount on education is significantly less than ten per cent of that. Nigeria's annual allocation for education is about 2 million US dollars, which is very low, regardless of the purchasing power in the country. In fact, according to CEIC, the purchasing power of the Nigerian currency in 2014 is 130 LCU per international dollar [13].

6.1.2.3 Low enrollment rates

The result of insufficient funding is lower enrollment rates. It is also worrisome to note that as of 2014, 40% of Nigerian children aged 6-11 do not attend any primary school, 30% of pupils drop out of primary school, and only 54% transition to secondary schools. [1] In this context, those who can attend school in Nigeria are often males of school age from wealthy families.

6.2 UNESCO's cooperation with Nigeria

6.2.1 Teaching staff and educational facilities

6.2.1.1 Teaching staff

UNESCO's difficulty in carrying out its work on education equity in Nigeria is not only due to inadequate funding; many other factors have led to this terrible situation. In addition to insufficient funding, other factors include access to education, a Shortage of quality teachers, Poor infrastructural facilities in schools, Inadequate supervision and inspection, Inadequate teaching/learning facilities, and a Poor learning environment [2].

A case in point is that the shortage of quality teachers is a massive blow to Nigeria's education. However, UNESCO can provide a small number of volunteer teachers to the country. However, a large number of domestic teachers are of low quality. Additionally, only a few elite students can

access high-quality education, while many educated citizens only receive low-quality education. The dilemma that led to this is “they (teachers) perform in teaching. Teachers' salaries in Nigeria have declined relative to those of other professions. The salaries are often too low to provide a reasonable standard of living.” [2]

6.2.1.2 Educational facilities

Another illustrative instance is poor facilities and learning environments. Infrastructural Facilities The number of schools and facilities available for basic education is inadequate for the number of children and youths [2]. In such a harsh environment, the teaching effect will be significantly reduced, and the results will naturally be far less than expected.

6.2.1.3 Social responses

Although UNESCO continues to assist, the dream of educational equity is still far away due to a lack of administrative commitment. Several policies have been made, and strategies for carrying out those policies have been implemented. Still, it has been discovered that the problem is not making a policy but the ability to follow up on the policies to ensure proper implementation [2].

Consequently, the public may hold the government accountable. People live in a society that excels in impunity and total disregard of civility and accountability, are not too critical of government policy that cannot put down counterpart funding, nor are they motivated into action to put an end to stealing the future by the corrupt public officers in charge of policy [3]. Therefore, the Nigerian government is highly corrupt and urgently needs democratization. However, since the Nigerian people have not yet solved their food and clothing problems, they naturally do not have the energy to overthrow the government. Moreover, UNESCO's efforts in Nigeria require sustained institutional support to promote educational equity.

6.3 Analysis of Educational Equity in Nigeria

6.3.1 Political factor

As a federal state, Nigeria has decentralized state power. However, the responsibilities of central and local governments lack clear demarcation. It is hard to implement policies. Meanwhile, Nigeria has serious corruption, and government funds (including education funds) are misappropriated. In addition, Nigeria's government changes frequently. The situation will cause policy inconsistency. The consequence arising from this is evident to all. Nigeria made many educational adjustments from 1990 to 2020, but none were fully implemented.

6.3.2 Economic factor

Nigeria's oil revenue accounts for 70% of its total income [16]. The economy relies on oil as a single resource, which makes its finances very fragile. If the oil price fluctuates, its social welfare funding will inevitably shrink. Concurrently, Nigeria has a large gap between the rich and the poor. That is to say, the investment in urban elite education is much higher than in rural areas.

6.3.3 Cultural factor

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Cultural, Political, and Economic Influences on Education in China and Nigeria

	China	Nigeria
Political System	Centralized power Strong execution	Federal system Unclear responsibilities Serious corruption
Economic Structure	Financial stability Stable investment in education	Single reliance on oil economy Insufficient budget
Culture, Faith & Law	Confucian culture attaches importance to education Legislative protection	Islamic tradition restricts women's education

In Nigeria, the interests of tribes are put first, which has led to the dispersion of educational resources and made it difficult for the federal government to coordinate. Meanwhile, approximately half of the Nigerian population practices Islam [17], and specific interpretations within Islamic cultural traditions posit that women are not obliged to pursue formal education. This ideology exerts a profound influence on female educational opportunities in the country in Table 1.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Suggestions

7.1.1 Suggestions for international organizations

First, the suggestion is for international organizations such as UNESCO. Policy formulation should be adapted to specific local conditions. For instance, countries with weak governance capacity (such as Nigeria) need gradual reforms. International organizations should help countries like Nigeria with anti-corruption reforms first and then promote reforms for educational equity.

7.1.2 Suggestions for governments

Developing countries like China can establish a mechanism involving international organizations, the central government, and local communities. They can also incorporate international policies into national development plans (such as China combining EFA goals with its poverty alleviation efforts). Once the educational governance model has matured, countries like China can transfer their expertise in education governance to other countries.

Meanwhile, single resource-dependent countries like Nigeria must promote fiscal structure reform and increase education budgets through various hard constraints, such as legislation.

7.1.3 Suggestions for society

Society should encourage citizens to take the initiative to participate in various NGO activities and gradually guide people to actively contribute to educational equity.

7.2 Innovations

First, it is a theoretical innovation. This study examines the interaction between global governance, national institutions, and social performance. It breaks through the analysis of single factors in existing literature. Meanwhile, this study proposes that international organization policies must be tailored to the country and explains the interaction between international organization policies and national local institutions.

Secondly, it is a methodological innovation. This study adopts the "positive and negative case comparison method" to analyze the role of institutional capacity on policy effects through the cases of China and Nigeria. This provides a methodological reference for comparing different countries.

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