

# Diffusion of the National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-based education in Southern and Eastern Africa

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## Introduction

One of the major debates in comparative education at present is whether there is increasing convergence or divergence in national systems of education. In the institutionalist perspective, homogenisation and 'institutional isomorphism' is striking around the world. This sameness is most remarkable 'on two fronts' (Meyer & Ramirez, 2003, p. 127): that of credentials and standards on the one hand and that of the educational definition of the world on the other. The counter argument sees not homogenisation and standardisation, but indigenisation and modification through a much more complex process of the 'displacement' of reforms by local realities (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003). In this process the 'semantics of reform' (Schriewer, 2000a) provide the appearance of similarity. Linked to this approach is the view that developing countries are often 'laboratories of modernity' and 'test sites for contested school reforms' (2004, p. 183; see also Stoler, 2002). Increasingly, this and other comparative approaches have been urging a more historical approach to analysis of educational borrowing (Ochs and Phillips, 2004; Crossley and Watson, 2003; Watson, 2001) and have also begun to emphasise the nature and character of regional borrowing (Dale and Robertson, 2002).

These approaches are particularly important for understanding the nature of education policy and curriculum diffusion in southern and eastern Africa where countries are both locked into historical relationships of varying kinds with one another and with others beyond the African continent. They are thus open to diverse influences from within, around and without. This article takes the case of the National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-

based education to explore the diffusion of educational ideas in regional contexts further. The centrepiece of education and curriculum policy in South Africa when it democratised in 1994, the National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-based education, have diffused throughout the region. Both Jansen (2004) and Spreen (2004) have provided accounts of how outcomes-based education became adopted and indigenised in the South African context. There has been less research into the nature of corresponding changes in the southern and eastern African region as a whole (Chisholm, 2005). There is also little understanding of whether ideas have spread because of, despite or in tandem with one another, in a process of mutual attraction (Ochs and Phillips, 2004) or whether the influence of external agencies in the developing world context is more telling in ensuring their spread (Samoff, 1999).

The work of Jansen (2004) and Spreen (2004) reveal an active local process of policy appropriation through individuals networked with one another through history, organisations and international linkages. In this process, rationales for the adoption of particular policies, decontextualised of their own origins and histories, are developed and policies are rearticulated to new needs and desires. Schriewer has used the concept of 'discourse coalitions' in attempting to understand ways in which 'alliances are established between certain representatives (or groups of representatives) of the social sciences, on the one hand, and certain political actors (or groups of political actors) on the other (Schriewer, 2003, p. 74). The mutually reciprocal relationship results in the elaboration of new discourses. In this paper, the concept is broadened to include political and social actors who include not only social scientists but also intellectuals who may not necessarily be university based, but are based in non-governmental organisations.

Theoretically and methodologically, the concept of 'discourse coalitions' and the techniques of network analysis provide a methodology for understanding processes of lending and borrowing. The diffusion of ideas is also critically linked to the relationships of individuals to particular networks. Ideas spread through those with weak rather than strong ties, those on the peripheries interacting with other networks (Granovetter, 1983). The role of policy entrepreneurs in this process of diffusion is also pivotal, linking with the notion of policy diffusion as export.

This article argues that as far as the National Qualifications Framework is concerned, South Africa has constituted an experimental test site, a laboratory for new ideas. The idea was first developed in the context of training markets becoming a central policy objective in the strongly market-oriented societies of the UK and Australia (Atchoarena and Delluc, 2002, p. 34). The reasons for adopting it in the region have been different from the original reasons for South Africa's adoption of the National Qualifications Framework. The paper will argue that these ideas are spreading in the region at the very moment that South Africa appears to be taking a step backwards from them and questioning their efficacy. Although there has been a common 'semantics' of reform, however, there has been relatively little implementation and corresponding impact on practice.

But in order to understand regional processes of borrowing and lending in relation to the National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-based education, it is necessary first to

outline briefly what the National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-based education are. The paper will then provide a brief history of the trajectory of educational change in the region to contextualise the discussion of borrowing and lending in the post-1994 period. An outline of South Africa's current political and economic role on the continent will follow, and precede an exploration of some of the processes of borrowing and lending related to the National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-based education in the region. Using evidence from regional conferences, the article will argue first that conferences are particularly important sites for discourse coalitions and policy entrepreneurs to spread ideas, but they do not necessarily however have an impact on what actually changes in practice. They are an important but not the only source of new ideas. In so far as the author of this article is based and working in South Africa, it participates in this borrowing process. In the development of its own approach, this article consciously borrows international ideas and uses international references in order to develop the argument.

The National Qualifications Framework was introduced through the South African Qualifications Authority Act in 1995 as a means of addressing inequalities in learning across different racial groups in the society. The Act provides for an outcomes-based system in which there is an explicit focus on what has been learned, as measured against 'socially agreed standards.' A National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-based education are implicated with one another and assume adherence to a broader market-oriented policy agenda (Acthoarena and Delluc, 2002, p. 318). The National Qualifications Framework in South Africa formed part of a larger effort to address unemployment through regulating the labour market and process of skills acquisition through transforming the fiscal, institutional and legislative framework within which institutions operate. In practice, as its chief architect Adrienne Bird, trade unionist and later Labour Department official, wrote in 2000, it:

Provides for the registration of general education as well as occupationally oriented education and training standards at general, further and higher levels of learning. It is made up of eight agreed national levels and a range of learning progression routes. Agreement on standards to be registered is recommended by 12 National Standards Bodies made up of employers, trades unionists, government officials, professional bodies and education and training providers.... Once standards and qualifications are registered, the quality assurance of the standards is ensured by a second set of established and new institutions. They register assessors and keep a record of learner achievements. They also formally accredit providers as competent to train.... The model was proposed to enable both young and older learners to have their current learning recognized through a process of Recognition of Prior Learning, and then have the opportunity to progress further in learning, be it in full-time or part-time contexts. (p. 166)

The National Qualifications Framework arose out of a transitional, pre-1994 context and desire to address unemployment, economic growth and learning. It was a consensus-building process between the trade unions, business and the African National Congress focused in the first instance on upgrading and improving skills of the unemployed, workers and older people. But in an ambitious early move, it assimilated into its sphere the entire schooling and higher education institutional complex. This was a process attended by considerable conflict, as will be shown. It was within the South African context, within the region and arguably internationally, a major educational experiment that ultimately had more impact on the

discourse than the practice of education and training; policy intentions, with some minor exceptions, did not easily translate into implementation, whether in the school, higher education or training arenas (see, for example, Atchoarena and Delluc, 2002, p. 340).

## **Educational change and development in the SADC region in historical perspective**

Educational change and development in the region has been marked by different periods of history: the period of colonialism and struggle for independence, the immediate post-independence period, structural adjustment, and the political and economic liberalisation of the post-1990 period. These periods do not coincide exactly with one another, but each phase has had distinctive impacts on the goals and directions that education has taken (The information in the following paragraphs rely on Chisholm, Makwati, Marope, Dumba-Safuli, 1998). Thus the colonial period in southern and eastern African countries saw the development of education as an elite phenomenon. Independence was achieved at different times in the region: Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi and Mauritius in the early 1960s, Angola and Mozambique in 1975, Zimbabwe in 1980, Namibia in 1990 and South Africa in 1994. Modernisation and expansion of education at all levels in order to achieve higher, national and individual emancipatory goals accompanied the achievement of independence. But for those who achieved independence in the 1960s and 1970s, the period 1975-1985 was marked by a protracted political and economic crisis both in the region and in the world economy. As terms of trade for primary products declined, so foreign exchange shortages emerged, reliance on foreign loans increased and indebtedness grew. Except for Botswana, no country in the region escaped this growing poverty trap.

But independence in the former Portuguese colonies did change the balance of power in the region against the white minorities in the then-Rhodesia, South West Africa and South Africa. Combined with poor management of resources, shrinking national budgets resulted in a squeeze on resources for education. Many countries in the region, except for Botswana – the one exception to the pattern - adopted structural adjustment policies from the mid-1980s in an attempt to address worsening conditions. These policies aimed at achieving macro-economic stabilisation but in fact the restraints on public expenditure, privatisation and decentralisation of services did not lead to improvements in living conditions and social services such as education.

Difficulties of the previous decade appear to have been compounded in this decade. Across the region, there was a drop in productive investments and there were few new enterprises. Greatest growth was recorded in the informal sector (Vieira, Martin and Wallerstein, 1992). The trend towards falling educational expenditure and greater reliance on donors grew. In some countries, external donors also began to finance recurrent costs, taking over basic state functions such as payment for staff salaries, equipment, furnishings, transport and security services. At the same time, countries in the region offered a home to South African and Namibian resistance movements, thus increasing their vulnerability to attack by South Africa.

A changing global order in the early 1990s, linked to a combination of local internal political dynamics and regional shifts as Namibia and South Africa gained independence, resulted in a process of political and educational reform across the region. Between 1992 and 1995, all countries in the region held multi-party elections. In each case, almost immediately following independence, a process of educational reform began. In each case, the process of stakeholder involvement and discussion was central in legitimating the process. The Education for All conference held in Jomtien in 1990 provided the frame for most of these new reform initiatives: across the region, whether in newly-independent South Africa, or in Zambia or Tanzania, policy priorities became focused on improving educational access, quality, equity, efficiency and relevance. Although not a major focus of educational reform or the EFA agenda, learner-centredness (distinct from outcomes-based education but sometimes associated with it) also now explicitly entered the picture. The conference brought together donor agencies, national ministries of education, NGOs and researchers in support of realising the EFA goals within a framework of an economic order in which market principles held increasing weight: privatisation, cost-sharing and fiscal discipline were the financial counterparts to the educational reforms.

A 1998 SADC study of these policy formulation and implementation processes (Chisholm, Makwati, Marope, Dumba-Safuli, 1998) concluded that there were major obstacles to implementation, mainly at the level of physical and human resources and capacity. It recommended an annual forum be established to promote regional cooperation and collaboration between different role players in order to begin to address these deficiencies. The report suggested that despite the good intentions of policy, the EFA policies remained at the discursive level, as a 'semantics of globalisation', (Schriewer, 2000) a way of talking about education, but having little impact on it. A recent World Bank report on curricula, examinations and assessment in sub-Saharan Secondary Education (CASASE) (2005) provided evidence that although learner-centred education is increasingly promoted as part of this new educational reform movement (eg Botswana, Tanzania, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda), there is little sign of it in the classroom (Leyendecker, 2005, pp. 26/7).

However, the very exercise of an investigation into SADC education policy, planning and management initiatives in 1998 involved the bringing together of new and different networks in the region, whose key elements begin to tell the story of diffusion. Each person in the team was part of a powerful network in his or her own context. With weak ties to one another, and interacting with other networks, the exercise was an example of how policies are diffused through relatively isolated networks. In this instance, the donor (Netherlands Embassy) brought together an international (UNESCO) and regional agency (SADC) and researchers from four different countries who straddled government and research organisations.

Up to this point, the article has focused on how the discourses of policy had, by 1994, converged across the region as consequence of a combination of economic, political and social forces. It is now necessary to sketch South Africa's role in the region before and after 1994.

## **South Africa's current role on the continent**

Under apartheid, the regional and foreign policy role played by South Africa was an aggressive and imperialistic one. Since the advent of democracy, there is some debate as to whether it is playing the role of regional hegemon or not. Supporting this perspective is the increasing economic penetration of Africa and especially the SADC region by South African companies and parastatals. According to Daniel, Naidoo and Naidu (2003), South Africa is now the largest foreign direct investor in SADC, its foreign direct investment in the region exceeding that of the United States and the United Kingdom combined. In 2001, total South African foreign direct investment amounted to R26.8b (Daniel, Lutchman and Naidu, 2005, p. 549). Mozambique represents the fastest-growing area of South African economic involvement, seeming 'poised to eclipse Zimbabwe as South Africa's largest trading partner.' While South Africa's export trade to Africa has flourished, the same cannot be said of its African import trade – the trade balance in South Africa's favour is substantial (pp. 546/7). South Africa's major trading partners are Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, Zambia and Angola. The most significant involvements are represented by the mining sector, banking and financial services, the telecommunication sector, the aviation market and Shoprite Checkers (553/4).

Despite this growing economic role in Africa, Daniel, Lutchman and Naidu do not believe that South Africa can be described as a regional hegemon. They distinguish between the Mandela and Mbeki Presidencies – in the former, foreign policy was often contradictory and still tied to past practices, as exemplified in the Lesotho incursion; in the latter, South Africa's involvement has been shaped through the African Union (AU) and New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and a policy framework that emphasises negotiation, partnership and cooperation. Not one of the critics of South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy' stance on Zimbabwe, for example, has called for war (Sachikonye, 2005). South Africa arguably does not exercise political and ideological hegemony in the region, although its role is substantial. In this context, it is to be expected that there would also be considerable exchange on questions of education and education policy.

## **Educational borrowing and lending in the region: the case of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).**

Not surprisingly, the first Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Education and Training adopted in 1997 promoted one of the key new features of the South African education and curriculum landscape: an integrated qualifications framework. Far from being just a technical attempt at coordinating qualifications, the National Qualifications Framework embeds an entirely new approach to education known as outcomes-based education. Outcomes-based education and standards-led education reform movements are in some contexts seen as distinct. The specifically South African variant is a version of a standards-based approach. South African trade unionists borrowed the idea from Canada, England, Scotland and New Zealand where national qualifications frameworks were nascent in the 1980s. The idea appealed as it promised a number of benefits, amongst them improving access to education through overcoming divisions between mental and manual labour, integrating education and training, recognising prior knowledge, and establishing equivalence between different qualifications to enable rapid upward mobility through different educational institutions and into the world of work. Although there is policy

convergence in SADC on this question, however, the motivations for adoption differ from those of South Africa: 'For SADC, the development of compatible national qualifications frameworks represents a strategic instrument to increase the competitiveness of the sub-region and contribute to further economic and labour market integration' (Atchoarena and Delluc, 2002, p. 341.)

In 1997, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) placed outcomes at the centre of new curriculum and assessment development in education and industry training. The interpretation and enactment of outcomes-based education has unfolded in different ways in the different sectors. Industry training took on competency-based unit standards in its curriculum model. The schooling sector rejected this and adopted a modified outcomes-based whole qualification approach. Higher education spurned outcomes and performance-based education in their entirety. This process has been attended by considerable contestation over the meaning and purposes of education.

The challenge and diversification of response unfolded through a series of steps. Only three years after it was introduced, in the face of seemingly intractable implementation problems, Curriculum 2005, as it was called, was reviewed (DOE, 2000). The Review found the approach to curriculum made little difference to what actually happened in the classroom, and well-resourced schools better able to adopt learner-centred education and new assessment methods than poorer-resourced schools. All schools complained that an excess of paperwork accompanied the new curriculum. The Review was a thinly disguised attack on outcomes-based education, but for political reasons the discourse remained intact.

In the face of considerable hostility from both the schooling sector as well as higher education, the National Qualifications Framework was reviewed shortly thereafter. (DOE, 2002) This Review in effect sought to reverse some of the more ambitious attempts at restructuring that were entailed in the panoply of standards-setting structures and bodies to which the South African Qualifications Authority had given rise. Although an outcomes-based, learner-centred approach still frames South African education policy and curriculum, some of its institutionalised features, such as the Standards-Generating Bodies established under the South African Qualifications Authority, have been dismantled. Unit-based qualifications for schools have also been abandoned. In school curricula, the 1990s emphasis on outcomes at the expense of subject knowledge and portfolio assessments instead of tests and examinations, have been replaced with a renewed emphasis on content and examinations (Vinjevoold, 2005). Outcomes-based education in South African schools now appears to exist more in the breach than in the observance.

The South African experience of outcomes-based education has not been one that deserves export, and yet it is being exported. As in its own case, the reasons for import are local and specific, the sources of the idea diverse – including both South African and more international personages, agencies and institutions – and it is to be expected that the export will be modified, adapted and resisted along the way. The South African story of the NQF is very much one of the adoption of an idea that seemed to provide solutions to local problems, implementation in a context unable to absorb its full implications (Spreen, 2004). In a seminal work, Tyack and Cuban (1995) have shown how reforms introduced with great

fanfare at one point can either take root, or wither away and die, forgotten, or be grafted onto existing institutions as add-ons. In the case of the NQF, it seems that there has been a process of selective appropriation, transformation and rejection of the original adopted and elaborated idea. As Allais has argued, the location of the NQF within a democratic discourse in South Africa has meant that its neo-liberal origins have been obscured, and that its basic assumptions have been insulated from criticism even though it is not achieving its mission (Allais, 2003).

By 2002, a number of SADC countries were formulating qualifications frameworks with a strong vocational and training slant (Atchoarena, 2002). Other than South African and Namibia, Botswana, Mauritius, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique had either developed a framework or established an authority or department to further develop and implement it by 2003 (SAQA, 2003, p. 18). These national qualification frameworks were being 'duplicated' 'with no factual evidence on implementing conditions, costs and on impact' (Atchoarena, 2002, p. 342.)

A Regional Qualifications Framework was also brought into being in the early 2000s (*Sowetan*, 2 September 2004; SAQA 2003). A SADC Technical Committee had been established and begun work. A feasibility study was being conducted with support from UNESCO and the ILO with the purpose of resulting in a project proposal for technical assistance in building national and regional capacity in building regional frameworks (SAQA, 2003, 20). This process paralleled the penetration of the region by publishers and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from South Africa. The latter 'appear to share the spirit of South African companies and entrepreneurs who are currently carving out export and investment opportunities throughout the continent' (Daniel et al., 2003; Morrow 2004, p. 332). According to Morrow, many of the most vigorous South African education NGOs are expanding 'into Africa'. (Morrow, 2004, p. 332). South African consultants are hired to advise on, amongst other things, curriculum reconstruction in the region for the purposes of developing the qualifications and curriculum frameworks and outcomes-based education (Morrow 2004; Pampallis, 2004). And publishers appear to be seeking new markets and opportunities for their products.

But what does all this mean in terms of the framework of borrowing and lending established above? I want to explore how and why the National Qualifications Framework has diffused into the region and with what effect. I want to argue that the experiment of the idea of the National Qualifications Framework has been exported, but there has been only partial acceptance. This export has happened at the moment of it being questioned in South Africa and where international support for it is diminishing. I also want to argue that South Africa can in a sense be seen as constituting a 'laboratory for modernity'. The local diffusion and expansion of the idea is integrally linked to the roles of a complex mix of actors, 'discourse coalitions,' that include donors, policy entrepreneurs, researchers, state actors and so on.

### **The Conference as networking agent in regional policy diffusion**

Steiner-Khamsi argues that 'issue networks are institutionalised in the form of associations, journals, newsletters, list-serves and conferences. They export and expand the issue for their own particular survival.' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 215) I have referred above of the research

project as network agent. Another potent agent through which different actors interact and diffuse ideas is the conference. Mostly convened by donors, or with the assistance of donors, they act as lightning rods for the transmission, circulation, consolidation, legitimation, rejection and diffusion of particular ideas. Whether the ideas promoted in the official curriculum of the conference are accepted or not, the conference puts them into circulation and ensures their absorption and wider dissemination. This does not occur in any simple way. There are different types of conferences, and they permit different types of discussions. They frame the discourse, and include and exclude what can be discussed. Whether the issues placed on the table are accepted or rejected, contested or not, they form part of an ongoing discussion that then reaches out more widely and touches other networks through the individuals who attend them. Always with an overt curriculum, the hidden curriculum of the conference becomes apparent in the issues that emerge outside of or in relation to the official agenda. Conference proceedings often crystallise these issues, bringing them into sharper focus.

This section focuses on two conferences, both of which produced proceedings, and both of which acted as a critical agent for the diffusion of ideas in the region (SAQA, 2003; Malawi National Examinations Board, 2005). The two conferences to be discussed are a conference hosted by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in 2003 in Pretoria on 'Qualifications and Standards: Harmonisation and Articulation Initiatives' and a conference hosted by a regional chapter of the International Assessment in Education Association association. The IIEA has an African chapter, the African Assessment in Education Association (AAEA). Three years ago, the Zambian Exams Board decided to host an assessment conference consisting of SADC bodies associated with AAEA. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sub-Regional Conference on Assessment will be considered here. The Malawi National Examinations Board hosted it in Malawi on 'Educational Assessment in a Democracy: Challenges, Opportunities and Prospects.' In each it is important to consider the 'discourse coalition' (Schriewer, 2000b) of the conference, as well as the process of formation of the discourse itself (Schriewer, 2003) Through this, 'discourse coalitions' create particular discourses that are placed in circulation. This process of discourse formation gains power through use by significant actors and makes available discursive strategies for the formation of new policy and social action.

The 'discourse coalition' brought together by SAQA in 2003, in the wake of the Review of the NQF which had proposed a significant diminution of its authority, included the donor, DANIDA, a team from NQF structures and NGOs in South Africa, and consultants, trainers and others working in the field of qualifications and industry training from Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Mexico and representatives from 9 SADC countries. The aim of the Conference was 'to give form and content to the idea of a regional qualifications framework' through 'sharing experiences' and exploring 'ideas on the articulation and harmonisation of qualifications and standards globally, regionally and sub-regionally.'(vii) The Preface by the Danish ambassador acknowledged that 'setting up a regional qualifications framework will be challenging' and that the 'European experience in articulating qualifications has shown that it is a complex endeavour'. Its support of the Conference was essentially to support regional cooperation, 'dialogue, interchange and renewal.' The driving force in the Conference was the locally beleaguered South African Qualifications Authority. The motivation for development of a Regional Qualifications

Framework embraced both the need to ensure greater mobility across borders as well as within contemporary systems of education.

A number of papers, including from the Mexican consultant and various industry-training consultants spoke for outcomes-based education and standards-generation. But it is clear from the Editorial Review that 'behind the seminar and the process there was some controversy about the feasibility of a regional qualifications framework, and even some doubt about the nature and processes of national qualifications frameworks.' (p. 2) The Editorial Review thought that 'these doubts are fuelled by reports of teething problems and difficulties in various ambitious projects to run qualifications frameworks in some of the countries represented' and the view that 'qualifications frameworks have grown and solidified into complex regulatory systems with problems of workability and the effect of stifling what they aim to enable.' The Namibian paper expressed the classic rationale for national qualifications frameworks. It related the emergence of the Namibian qualifications framework to the discourse of global competitiveness and need for national economies to meet this challenge through human resource development. The NQF was seen as enabling labour market mobility and participation, lifelong learning and improved education and training through modernisation of its qualifications framework. Both the Namibian and South African presentations emphasised that learning from the experience meant ensuring that an NQF should be 'affordable, simple and meaningful.'(80) Like the Namibian presentation, the South African referred to the challenges at a technical level and at the level of 'stakeholder support,'(84) signalling that these had been in short supply. Both the Australian and the New Zealand presentations warned that, in the words of the Australian, 'the inevitable complexities of the system act as a barrier to other stakeholders.' (95)

The New Zealand presentation reported controversy around the introduction of unit standards across all sectors, that the process was costly, and that regional approaches in the South Pacific region were still fragmentary. Indeed, 'the philosophy implicitly (defining) the purposes of education in terms of the acquisition of units of competence ... did not command respect and support across the full spectrum of educational and political opinion in New Zealand would be an understatement' (p. 116). Debate in New Zealand around unit-standards and competency-based education was 'acrimonious' 'and exacerbated the fault lines in New Zealand education' with 'much of the bitterness remain(ing) to this day.' (p. 116) This presentation made an impassioned plea that 'governments and quality assurance agencies should abandon the NQF model:

Its conceptual and practical limitations are profound, and an NQF is thus likely to mislead, rather than inform labour markets, governments, students and other interested parties. This is not an argument for abandoning the educational and social goals that have often been identified with an NQF. Quite the contrary, the goals are of fundamental importance (access, equity, quality, skills and knowledge acquisition, human development) but an NQF is not the best means of helping to achieve those goals. Indeed, it may inhibit progress and be a positive hindrance. (p. 117)

Another South African paper, reflecting on the South African experience, noted the resistance in South Africa, too, and signalled the need to retreat on some fronts, but to build on the SADC front and to target in particular private and enterprise-related Technical and Vocational Education and training, 'the poorest corner of official structured learning in all

SADC countries' (p. 25). The rationale presented for further work on qualifications frameworks was that anything other than an NQF was still part of a colonial inheritance.

Despite all the caveats and the retreats evident in all those countries that have taken on board National Qualifications Frameworks, the presentation on a SADC Qualifications Framework for the region nonetheless was committed to the idea through the SADC protocol and on the basis of the idea of achieving a common system in the region. The view was that a qualifications framework could, as all the NQFs had thought, promote mobility and transfer across borders, whether national, institutional or personal. The idea is a great one, but the obstacles appear to be immense.

The conference provides an interesting example of how a discourse coalition is brought together and discourse formed around an idea to be exported: the narratives are those of ongoing work in the cause of a dream, of battles won and lost, of identification of the strategic points for continued work and intervention, and recommitment to an ideal. In this way, global, local and regional are brought together, visions and policies are promoted and ideas are circulated and made common currency, regardless of their usefulness or efficacy on the ground.

The second conference is completely separate from the first, and involves a different network. Different countries in the region host the annual sub-regional Conference on Assessment. It provides an opportunity for regional Ministry officials, university-based researchers, examinations commissions and others working in the field of assessment to talk about their work and exchange ideas. In 2003, for example, Zambia was the host and the conference theme was 'Learner Assessment for Improved Educational Quality.' Interestingly, the term 'learner' is a very specific South African-introduced reference to what elsewhere is referred to as 'pupils' or 'students'. In 2004, Zimbabwe hosted it with the theme: Benchmarking Ethno—based Learning and School-based Assessment in a Multi-ethnic and Multicultural environment.'

In 2005 Malawi hosted it with the theme 'Education Assessment in a Democracy: Challenges, Opportunities and Prospects.' Malawi's Second Development Plan for 1985-1995 stipulated a number of reforms. These include a shift towards 'methodology-centred and competency-based instruction.' One of the key proponents of South Africa's early form of outcomes-based education, whose work was roundly criticised for its incomprehensibility, was a consultant in Malawi on this shift in approach. Publishers followed soon after, looking for markets. (Interview Fathima Dada, Johannesburg, 24/5/2005) An entirely different network from the SAQA network, its papers also nonetheless reveal a preoccupation with and advocacy of modes of assessment associated with outcomes-based and learner-centred education. Increasingly, exams – deeply entrenched in systems in the region – are criticised and formative and continuous assessment are promoted. Outcomes-based education seems to have entered the discourse relatively uncritically with little real reflection on actual experience with it. To what extent it has actually been absorbed into and changed practice will require more classroom-based investigation than currently exists in the region. Indeed, while there is growing convergence at the level of the discourse, demonstrating interaction between people, there is little evidence of growing convergence at the level of practice.

Conferences are one of the main vehicles for the spread of new ideas and policies in the region. They provide a space for the discourse coalitions to be brought together to elaborate a common discourse and understanding of the role of qualifications frameworks and related institutions. But how and what may change in practice, and whether there is growing convergence at the level of practice, requires an examination of actual country-level policies and practices. Such examinations in the vocational education and training arena reveal that there is little convergence at the national level, despite the fact that many countries have adopted qualifications frameworks and competency-based models of training. As one study concludes, 'systems (in the region) have evolved in a piecemeal and unsystematic way ... that reflects historical accretions of institutions.' (McGrath, 2005, p. 8). In many instances, Athcoarena concludes, policy intentions have simply not been matched by implementation (Athcoarena, 2002). Given limited resources, and the evidence that many of these changes require resource-rich contexts, it is likely that practice in schools and classrooms has also not changed, and that the pattern is similar to that in vocational education and training, but much more work is needed to establish this and especially how school-based practices mediate and express the new discourses.

### **South Africa as a laboratory for modernity: the NQF**

The idea that every universal idea has a local root, that policies are first experimented with in developing country contexts before being taken up in developed country contexts is an appealing one. The danger of the idea is the lurking conspiracy theory behind it and the way in which local agency is ignored. Thus, for example, we could perhaps argue that donors, consultants and the like imposed the National Qualifications Framework in South Africa and now in the region. National Qualifications Frameworks were embryonic in the UK and Scotland when taken up by South Africa. Consultants embroiled in the issues and debates in their own countries were certainly brought to South Africa to consult on how to bring such a framework into being. And donors also facilitated conferences, workshops and meetings between South African trade unionists and the developing competency-based movement in industry training in the developed world in the 1990s. However, the ideas and proposals brought in and facilitated by donors and consultants were eagerly sought after, worked upon and transformed by local practitioners.

As the South African National Qualifications Framework was brought into being, the international community watched to see what would unfold. South Africa could provide hope and new beginnings. And the NQF, not yet fully elaborated, or elaborated in the developed world, could provide a new beginning for the developed world. In 2004, the International Labour Organisation, which along with the World Bank, OECD and EU had facilitated and promoted South Africa's experiment, commissioned a British-based consultant who had been involved in the initiative from the beginning to review the experience of National Qualifications Frameworks (Young, 2004). The author notes towards the end that 'most of the experiences on which this report draws with the exception of South Africa come from industrialised countries such as England, Scotland and New Zealand – all countries with relatively high levels of resources.' (p. 60) And yet, the report draws on the differences of experience and lessons of implementation to reflect on why the South African experiment has been a failure. The main concern in the paper seems to be with South Africa. Issues central to the debates in South Africa about the NQF are lifted but

dealt with by reference to the experience of other countries, except in some instances. It provides a damning critique of the experience of the NQF in South Africa.

The author locates the origins of the NQF in the competency-based frameworks, need for certification of youth employment schemes and shift from provider to employer-led training that emerged in the neo-liberal environment of late 1980s Britain and New Zealand. It resurfaced in the mid-1990s linked to the idea of lifelong learning. The origins in Scotland were in universities. The author shows how most of the goals have not been realised in practice and how some of the assumptions have been fundamentally flawed. National Qualifications Frameworks promote credit accumulation and transfer through unit-based qualifications that are supposed to promote transportability and transparency and not require any specific prior learning programme. But in practice for example, he argues that credit-based qualifications have not provided for quicker progression up the educational ladder and qualifications frameworks cannot on their own do much to increase the demand for skills or knowledge and overcome deeply rooted inequalities that make for skill and educational differences. A basic fallacy of the notion of the NQF, he suggests, is the fallacy that education (or qualifications) can compensate for society (social inequalities). The author argues that most countries do have clear progression routes – for the majority the issues are not clear career paths; it is how to improve their capabilities to move up the ladder. NQFs, he argues, are top-down initiatives, using a grid-approach outside the realities and sites of formal institutions, curricula and pedagogies that creates problems because of their remoteness from practice. NQFs are designed independent of provision and are based on a single set of levels, standards and outcomes. An outcomes-based framework, he says, is essentially an assessment framework, not a framework for provision – and relatively few learners have the prior skills and knowledge to make use of such an assessment framework – most need provision as well.

The author distinguishes between different types of frameworks – enabling, strong and weak, partial and comprehensive, unit based and qualification-based frameworks and institution-led and outcomes-based frameworks. The starting assumption of most NQFs is that ‘qualifications should be unit-based; in other words, the learning outcomes assumed to be necessary for a particular qualification are divided up into their basic elements or units.’ (p. 24) The idea is that this approach maximises flexibility and choice for learners and employers. But in practice, here, too, he argues, it has created more problems than it has solved. The absence of a linkage between the qualification and provision is, he argues, a particular problem for developing countries: ‘the danger is that qualifications will proliferate where there is no provision leading to them. An expensive activity without obvious wider benefits’ (26).

What does he identify as the main problems with implementing NQFs? These cannot be resources or resistance, he says, as these characterise most reforms – they are principally political, administrative and technical or professional. Political difficulties are from the establishment of entities outside government with great power; administrative difficulties arise from ‘the proliferation of new agencies and committees concerned with quality assurance, standard setting and assessment that NQFs invariably generate... They frequently have difficulty in recruiting members and staff with appropriate expertise (32). Technical or professional problems relate to the ‘relatively straightforward activity of setting and marking

examination, and for the need for new language of standards, units and levels to define criteria that have to apply to very different qualifications.’ (33)

‘Success stories’, he says, have been incremental, based on trust, shared practice and policy breadth. The lesson from Scotland is that NQFs ‘on their own have a relatively modest role in reforming qualifications and improving vocational education.’ (37) The lesson from New Zealand is that the establishment of powerful national organisations such as national qualifications authorities can lead to head-on confrontations with governments. The lesson from Ireland is to try not to be too prescriptive, but to emphasise at all times incrementalism, consensus and compromise.

The report is an interesting one for its metaphorical use of comparative perspective: it indirectly reports on and analyses the failure of the NQF, competency and outcomes-based models of education in the South African context by drawing on the other contexts in which NQFs have been implemented. It learns from the North to understand South Africa. And it helps the North and international agencies understand South Africa and its experiment – an experiment not to be supported in its current form. This is a report that is likely to influence ILO approaches to and support of NQFs in the region as much as in its own backyard.

## **Conclusion**

The roots of new policy and curriculum approaches in southern and eastern Africa do not only lie in a borrowing process from South Africa, although particular NQF and outcomes-based aligned discourse coalitions in South Africans have tried hard to export their own brand of the National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-based education. Although South Africans borrowed and adapted the idea of a National Qualifications Framework themselves, South Africa was also a key test-site for the concept as a whole. Policy entrepreneurs have lent their expertise to South Africa and South Africans have lent theirs to the region. After a decade of experimentation, even those who initially consulted on it are now in serious doubt as to the South African model. Many who originally supported its development in South Africa are now pulling back. The paper has explored the conference as a vehicle through which discourse coalitions and policy entrepreneurs linked to the National Qualifications Framework and outcomes-based education create and circulate discourses, borrow and lend, selectively appropriate, modify and reject policies. Consultants are one form of policy entrepreneur, but these take many forms and include publishers, whose role has not been explored here. Regional conferences, in particular, as those discussed here exemplify, are a critical vehicle for diffusion of ideas and approaches on the embryonic Regional Qualifications Framework, as well as the approaches taken to outcomes-based education in the region. Whether these have had any bite in practice still remains to be seen, given the documented need for but absence of resources and capacity to enact these policies.

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