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“LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND” AS A NEW MOTTO FOR THE UN SYSTEM: ITS IMPACT ON PORTUGUESE ADULT EDUCATION POLICY

ABSTRACT

Educational governance has become increasingly complex due to the emergence of the post-welfare state together with specialised networks acting across nations, such as the recently formed United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Group. In this context, the global circulation of policies, priorities and lifelong learning narratives impacts national agendas through frameworks and diverse multilevel policy instruments. Adopting elements of global governance theory, this article examines the 2017 Shared Framework on Leaving No One Behind and argues that it has served as a milestone in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on the national level, while contributing to mainstreaming communication and written discourses in all sectors of the educational arena since its publication. The article reflects on aspects of Portugal's alignment to “Leaving No One Behind” (LNOB) through critical discourse analysis (CDA) of textual evidence in two interrelated national policy documents. The findings show the impact of this global policy-speak on recent Portuguese official documents.

Keywords: *educational global governance, the United Nations System, Leaving No One Behind, Portuguese adult education, critical policy analysis*

»NIKOGAR NE PUSTI OB STRANI« KOT NOV SLOGAN SISTEMA ZDRUŽENIH NARODOV: VPLIV NA POLITIKO IZOBRAŽEVANJA ODRASLIH NA PORTUGALSKEM – POVZETEK

Zaradi pojava postsocialne države in specializiranih mednarodno delujočih mrež, kot je nedavno ustanovljena Skupina OZN za trajnostni razvoj, postaja upravljanje na področju izobraževanja vedno bolj kompleksno. V tem kontekstu globalno širjenje politik, prednostnih nalog in diskurza o vseživljenjskem učenju vpliva na nacionalne agende prek različnih političnih okvirov in instrumentov. V članku na podlagi elementov teorije globalnega upravljanja preučujemo OZN-ov skupni okvir za delovanje iz leta 2017, naslovljen Leaving No One Behind (Nikogar ne pusti ob strani), in zagovarjamo tezo, da je ta dokument služil kot mejnik pri implementaciji Agende 2030 na nacionalni ravni, saj se od objave naprej kaže njegovo splošno upoštevanje v komunikaciji in pisnem diskurzu vseh sektorjev na področju izobraževanja. Ukvarjamo se z vidiki prilagajanja

politiki »Nikogar ne pusti zadaj« na Portugalskem, in sicer prek kritične analize diskurza dveh dokumentov portugalske nacionalne politike. Ugotovitve potrjujejo vpliv tega globalnega političnega žargona na nedavne uradne dokumente na Portugalskem.

Ključne besede: *globalno upravljanje v izobraževanju, sistem Združenih narodov, Nikogar ne pusti ob strani, izobraževanje odraslih na Portugalskem, kritična analiza politike*

INTRODUCTION

The reform of the welfare state, particularly in Europe, in the last quarter of the 20th century, was decisive for the emergence of the neoliberal state and the adoption of human capital theory, market-oriented principles and values (Barros, 2012). Since this time, several changes can be observed in Western societies, including (i) devaluation of average wages and the corresponding increase in structural unemployment and insecure work, which has led to phenomena such as the working poor and homelessness; (ii) high inequality in income distribution and the resulting trend towards the (re)polarisation of the social class structure through the political protection of privileged groups on the one hand (Agamben, 2005), and middle class downward social mobility on the other (Leventoğlu, 2014), combined with the devaluation of degrees and traditional qualifications (Satoshi & Takehiko, 2022); and (iii) the selective removal of workers' rights to boost the economy, resulting in a loss of dignity in the workplace and the growing normalisation of multiple forms of exploitation and exclusion (King, 2010). These are but a few of the structural factors that have threatened the respect of universal human rights and reshaped the socioeconomic landscape of human societies worldwide since the consolidation of the so-called Washington Consensus.

As a consequence, the current framework of post-welfare states and International Organisation systems (IO systems) has complex and fragmented connections with (i) the architecture of global socioeconomic governance, which has promoted a silent displacement of labour and social rights, and (ii) the process of public policy production, in a general sense.

In this article, I am particularly interested in the impacts of this overall framework on the fields of educational governance and adult education. However, tackling this new landscape of global educational governance presents challenges for policy researchers, both in terms of identifying the key-actors in the global flux of influence and power, and in terms of gathering all of the interconnected documents and mechanisms that influence the process of making and implementing decisions, as the mass of interrelated political publications in each area of public policy can reach avalanche proportions in both volume and diversity and rapidly become obsolete.

Therefore, on the one hand, the critical policy analysis (Popović, 2018) underpinning this article focuses on a universal subject matter under construction: a recent political pledge to leave no one behind. Through this prism, the implicit subject of study is the unifying power of the United Nations (UN) System, which has fluid characteristics despite the

statement of commitment disseminated through a set of policy texts. On the other hand, the explicit object of study is a corpus composed of key UN System written publications, particularly the 2017 Shared Framework on *Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development* (UN 2017 Shared Framework), and key Portuguese national policy documents, particularly the national *2019 Recommendations on Adult Education and Training* (2019 R-AET), and the *2023 Portuguese Voluntary National Review* (2023 VNR).

The research problem concerns the different meanings, influences and implications of adult education policy in Portugal in recent years. It is necessary to examine how this country has declared an interest in implementing specific measures in response to the new UN system motto in its policy texts. Consequently, this article aims to answer the following research question: what are the main drivers of change in Portuguese written discourse on adult education today?

To underline the research problem findings and answer the research question, we carried out a triangulation of two different qualitative and interpretive methods in order to analyse the documentary sources selected: (a) qualitative content analysis (QCA), as proposed by Gläser-Zikuda et al. (2020), was used to determine the presence of terms related to the "Leaving No One Behind" (LNOB) pillars, e.g., equality and non-discrimination; and (b) critical discourse analysis (CDA), as proposed by Fairclough and Fairclough (2015), was used to interpret both the details of the texts themselves and their contextual relations to the humanist political agenda of LNOB. This methodological approach was inspired by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), who highlight the potential for combining different discourse analytical and non-discourse analytical approaches in empirical study. However, it was not our intention to mobilise post-structuralist discourse theory, but simply to search for partial connections between the LNOB categories and the discursive priorities of proposals and decisions in the field of public adult education provision by policy actors that related to the principles of "Leaving No One Behind". With this in mind, the research aims to highlight the ways in which IO systems, particularly this UN agenda, influence and enhance national policy making rationales, identifying elements of policy transfer (Stone, 1999) between UN goals and national policy documents.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS ON THE REVIVAL OF AN OLD POLITICAL PROMISE

The LNOB pledge is the renewal of a humanistic societal project in response to issues resulting from the mainstream economic development choices of the modern era. To some extent it constitutes a revival of utopistic landmarks from critical social theory and, as such, it calls on us to identify existing "unjust, avoidable or extreme inequalities in outcome and opportunities, and patterns of discrimination in law, policies and practices. This will also entail addressing patterns of exclusion, structural constraints and unequal power relations that produce and reproduce inequalities" (UN Sustainable Development Group

[UN-SDG], 2022, p. 7). The most recent UN (2017) vision is therefore (re)presented as “strongly grounded in international human rights law” (p. vii). As a critical utopianism for the contemporary world, it suggests that a new social contract is required if UN global political action seriously intends to “reverse the trend of rising inequalities” globally (UN, 2017, p. 31).

These are not new ideas or even innovative statements (Alexander, 1994). Nevertheless, they could represent a groundbreaking call for a shift in current mainstream global governance agendas. However, this will only be effective if it creates powerful synergies capable of countering the neoliberal trends of the recent past. Indeed, the late 20th century emergence of neoliberal states, particularly in Europe, reshaped public policy mandates in a way that has generally neglected the universal social wellbeing of individuals, families and the community in favour of the wellbeing of the market and financial agents, shifting political action-plans towards the promise of welfare capitalism (Benassi & Mingione, 2019). In the field of education, this also induced a shift away from the idea of learning to be and to live in greater harmony with other living beings, or “living well” (Hessel & Morin, 2011) – though not in the strictly material sense of luxury, wealth and possessions – towards the individualistic 21st century focus on learning to adapt, largely in response to the fourth industrial revolution, or perish in the coming digital tsunami. Despite the burgeoning lifelong learning paradigm, notably disseminated by European Union and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development political documents in the field of education, several researchers have offered critiques, asking, for example, if we should learn to live or live to learn (Bajner, 2019), or whether the simple collection of (competitive) skills (throughout life) will solve the lack of (decent) employment opportunities facing young adults today (Lima, 2018). However, such criticisms have had little resonance within mainstream global educational governance bodies, mainly because, while relevant, they remain academic publications that are (usually) read by academics in academic settings (despite the potential for open access). We believe one way to change this could be the (re)construction of transnational contra-hegemonic alliances of critical educators embedded in social movements beyond academic walls, with the knowledge to think globally and the ability to act locally in strategic and meaningful ways.

In this context, we argue that the UN 2017 Shared Framework has been successful in re-focusing attention on the need to “set up programmes to support redistributive fiscal policy and progressive taxation, reverse extreme concentrations of wealth, and progressively achieve greater equality” (p. 6). While it serves as a milestone in supporting the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda (see UN, 2015), it also has the potential to contribute to the (re)emergence of contra-hegemonic humanistic values in “global policy-speak” (Solesin, 2020, p. 3), based on the LNOB concept, to achieve sustainable development. This is significant because it suggests an (unusual) change to the UN System’s favoured approach. In recent UN policy, the rhetoric appears to have shifted away from utilitarian concerns about learning and economic development in favour of a more humanistic perspective. The extent to which this has embedded a humanistic space of action into official

education policy-making channels and impacted agendas is one of the main questions this article aims to tackle through a case study of changes to Portugal's Qualify Program, and its impact in terms of embedding (or failing to embed) a commitment to "Leaving No One Behind" into the field of adult education.

By tracking the flux of recent international political publications since the UN 2017 Shared Framework, it is possible to observe a sort of mainstreaming effect in these interconnected public written discourses, which appears to support this renewed humanistic vision through the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, as a minimum, Goal 4 now appears in publications in all areas of the education sector. The most interesting example of the potential reach of the UN System's power to convene is the recent self-repositioning of UNESCO (2021) in the global arena as a "global leader in education", which has provided a valuable opportunity to reassert education as "a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development" (p. 2).

In this context, the global challenge for humanist politics concerns the ability to create political channels to (i) slow down the high-speed pace that has been reached with regard to the customisation of tertiary education, and (ii) disassemble the efficient market production of a lifelong lack of skills targeting active age working adults. The opposite trend will be to embrace a transformative and emancipatory vision of the potential of education and critical learning. The invitation, then, is to "reimagine how knowledge and learning can shape the future of humanity and the planet" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 2), and how this may impact the notion of sustainability.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE THEORY TO UNPACKING GLOBAL POLICY-SPEAK IN NATIONAL WRITTEN DISCOURSES

In order to address this subject, the research underpinning this article draws on elements of global governance theory, not because it offers a complete and stable model, but precisely because it offers a broad set of conceptual tools that provide a basis and a lens through which to consider a research subject seemingly just as fluid and globalised as modernity itself (Bauman, 2000). We use Zürn's (2018) definition of global governance as "the exercise of authority across national borders as well as consented norms and rules beyond the nation state" (p. 4) to consider the interaction between states and IO systems. In this context, we agree with Solesin (2020) when he states that,

Taking stock of the variety of approaches, a governance-centred approach might be particularly helpful in order to make sense of recent changes in the global education landscape. Despite the lack of definition around the term, it remains a powerful theoretical approach. The notion of global governance of education is thus useful in that it captures and makes sense of the multiple actors, arenas, processes and structures involved in the steering and influence of education – as well as of all the levels through which power and authority in education are now distributed and exercised. (p. 6)

In line with this broad theoretical background, this article mainly considers the processes and factors that allow the transfer of UN LNOB goals into national policy documents. More precisely, this article aims to shed light on the written political discourses surrounding the shared UN System Framework for Action, which claims to oppose “the concentration of wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands” and to seek to “combat these trends” (UN, 2017, p. v).

These purposes affect and impact post-welfare state priorities for public policy production in complex ways, particularly as the traditional policy cycle has given rise to an interconnected set of global networks, frequently based on inter-agency task forces composed mainly of appointed members and nominated sectors experts, raising questions about expertise and democracy (Christensen et al., 2023). These networked teams operate according to stages (usually each stage of any policy process is governed by a specific network), and are capable of establishing cross-border interdependencies and enabling the emergence of clusters with the power and funds to take effective actions and decisions that operate across nations. They include the recently formed UN Sustainable Development Group (see UN-SDG, n.d.), which plays an important role in global governance today.

In this context, the global circulation of policies, priorities and narratives of sustainable lifelong learning impacts national educational agendas through frameworks and diverse multilevel policy instruments, as demonstrated by a myriad of interrelated international open access publications, documents and reports¹ produced by these designated task forces and various website landing pages. Indeed, Vladimirova and Le Blanc (2016) highlight the fact that a significant proportion of contemporary global public policy expresses a broad interest in, concern for, and references to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Furthermore, when analysing global policy publications that directly impact adult education policy and practice on the national and regional levels, we see narratives connecting SDG 4 and other SDGs to some extent. This is expressed, for instance, in the UNESCO (2016) Unpacking Guide, relevant to the Portuguese scenario, which states that “Education in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is not restricted to SDG4. Education is specifically mentioned in targets of the five goals² listed below [SDG3, SDG5, SDG8, SDG 12 and SDG 13], but also linked to almost all the other SDGs in one way or another” (pp. 7–8).

Critical policy analysis of key UN System publications (Jones & Coleman, 2005) enables us to observe the ongoing contemporary significance of building and monitoring “common agendas”, as well as the increasing centrality of big data in the global governance process.³ More specifically, on the one hand, statistical monitoring networking groups

1 For example, flagship reports, annual SDG progress reports (since 2016), resolutions and decisions, official records, conference documentation.

2 For more information on all SDGs and their history, see UN (n.d.-a).

3 A recent example is the launch of the UN Data Commons for the SDGs (see UN, 2023b).

have proliferated in the world of global policy⁴ and, on the other, policy capacity building emerges as a central element in the creation of national policy roadmaps, capable of translating and transferring the decisions of intergovernmental bodies into actual national policies and actions.

One such influential policy tool in the global governance sphere is the UN-SDG 2022 guide, *Operationalizing Leaving No One Behind*, which serves as a "good practice note" to support the work of UN Country Teams (UNCT) to mainstream and implement the 2030 Agenda on the national level, ensuring the delivery of tangible results by each government. The guide is intended to provide "advocacy and policy support to the national development planning process" (UN-SDG, 2022, p. 8), and should be mobilised alongside a cohesive series of policy tools specially created for the Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams, such as those addressing the human rights, values and principles enshrined in the UN Charter (see UN, n.d.-b).

In this respect, it is worth noting that each UNCT is led by the Resident UN Coordinator, who is the designated representative of the UN Secretary-General in a given country and acts as the key liaison person between supranational bodies, in particular the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), and global governance structures on the national level, such as permanent delegations within ministries of foreign affairs, i.e. the permanent national delegations to UNESCO.

This entire constellation of key policy actors (policymakers, planners, decision-makers) is linked, among other factors, by the UN-SDG (2022) country guidance document, which sets out a detailed step-by-step methodology, involving "a set of five steps for LNOB: analysis, action, monitoring, accountability and meaningful participation" (p. 11). Throughout the process, member states are encouraged to adopt an evidence-based approach supported by disaggregated data and grounded in causal analysis.

STRIVING FOR EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION ON THE GLOBAL LEVEL

The reference to causal analysis in the UN documentation on achieving the SDG principle of LNOB is particularly interesting given that the grounding notion of this research methodology, widely used in social pedagogy and critical andragogy, is that any transformative action aiming to empower and emancipate must necessarily begin with a detailed multilevel diagnosis (Morgan, 2013), followed by the application of critical social theory (Crossley, 2004; Zeus, 2004) to highlight the root causes of exclusion and oppression (Baycan & Öner, 2023; Daly & Silver, 2008; Freire, 2000), as well as any obstacles to the implementation of a human rights-based approach in the policy and lawmaking process (Klinkner & Howard, 2020). This could indicate that global policy is beginning to be shaped by a rights and values-based process, potentially replacing the neoliberal,

⁴ An example is the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see UN, 2023a).

conservative trends of the past with a more humanistic future trend, through the creation of a new social contract. In the field of education, UNESCO (2021) has clearly backed such a position, arguing:

This new social contract must be grounded in human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity. It must encompass an ethic of care, reciprocity, and solidarity. It must strengthen education as a public endeavour and a common good [...] [;] we need to take urgent action to change course, because the future of people depends on the future of the planet, and both are at risk. The report proposes a new social contract for education – one that aims to rebuild our relationships with each other, with the planet, and with technology. (p. iii, v)

In the context of the abovementioned operationalisation guide, subtitled a *Good Practice Note for UN Country Teams*, causal analysis is considered “a critical part of the LNOB and should be carried out through a participatory process involving all members of the UN country team, and with community engagement as relevant” (UN-SDG, 2022, p. 29). This is intended as a basis on which to construct more inclusive national dialogue, as well as a way “to ensure feedback on people’s priorities and challenges” (UN-SDG, 2022, p. 90), allowing the voices of local actors to “enter the advisory mechanisms – that get heard by decision makers” (p. 91).

In this sense, the UN 2022 operationalisation guide coherently echoes the previous UN 2017 Shared Framework vision and promise, which stated that,

The transformative 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including its Sustainable Development Goals, offers fresh hope, setting out a new paradigm for more inclusive and sustainable development to ensure freedom from fear and want for all people, without discrimination. If that hope is to be realized, all stakeholders must act urgently in a whole-of-society effort to implement the new Agenda, working in partnership to *address the root causes* of conflict and deprivation – including discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and other human rights abuses – and *to halt and reverse the deepening divisions* in our societies. (UN, 2017, pp. v–vi, our italics)

When analysing the “Leaving No One Behind” concept at the heart of the SDGs alongside UN key-policy texts, its discursive function as a political motto for a renewed mandate becomes clear (Martens et al., 2021). Indeed, if we consider the history of the UN as an international organisation, we see that its role on the international stage has expanded from maintaining peace and security in the 20th century post-war period to encompass a wide range of global issues. A new organisational approach emerged in response to this expansion and the UN became part of the current UN System. This structural transformation is more compatible with the pathways and characteristics of contemporary global

governance, as the UN System works "in addition to the UN itself, comprises many funds, programmes and specialised agencies, each of which have their own area of work, leadership and budget" (UN, n.d.-c).

On the one hand, the organisation has continued to grow over the years (initially comprising 53 countries, it now has 193 members states; see *history.com* editors, 2018). On the other, its inherent power has been used, regulated and managed in different ways (Mahmood et al., 2022; UN, 2018), giving rise to favourable outcomes, as well as several criticisms (e.g., Escobar, 2004; Ilcan, 2006). Through this prism, we could question whether the adoption of LNOB represents a tentative turning point in its role and mission – a move away from global neoliberal political trends towards a more humanistic approach – or if it is simply a case of mainstream rhetorical sloganeering, deflecting attention to leave the path clear for "politics and business as usual", as Pogge (2010) has argued.

However, more research and policy analysis will be needed in the coming years in order to understand the current direction of change and its sociopolitical effects. With this in mind, certain questions could provide a useful lens through which to observe the tensions and conflicts between the perspectives interacting in the global arena. For instance, are members of the (cosmopolitan and technocratic) elite not the main appointed participants in the multitude of specialised networking groups that characterise policy production and scrutiny today? And how can we interpret the partnerships between the UN System and gigantic corporations, particularly the IT sector, these being both a result and an integral part of the neoliberal economic globalisation that has spread since the Washington Consensus?

Even if the real fluxes of transnational power effectively obstruct the UN 2017 Shared Framework's vision and renewed mandate for more emancipatory and humanistic policy building, it is unquestionably an unusual document, as demonstrated by its assertion, though only in an endnote, that "rising inequalities, particularly when they reach extreme levels, can further skew power relations since elites have more to lose, and the poor and marginalized have little access to decision-makers and public services" (p. 66). Indeed, demands to "redistribute fiscal policy and progressive taxation", advocacy of the need to "insulate democratic institutions and processes from elite political capture" and calls to "reinforce labour rights, including decent work", to quote just some of the strategic foundations viewed as "elements of a comprehensive and coherent package of policy and programme support areas to combat discrimination and inequalities within and among countries at the country, regional and global levels" (UN, 2017, pp. 5–6), mirror several of the criticisms circulating away from the public spotlight, in literature that criticises neoliberal policy agendas (Carrier, 2018; Giroux, 2008), and oppose the claims and socio-economic choices of the global elite, which influence global political behaviour (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2009).

When the LNOB motto is viewed as a renewal of an old political promise, namely that of the Welfare State, extended to the contemporary global governance arena, neutrality

can hardly be expected. Indeed, UN system key policy texts since its introduction do not shy away from combative political rhetoric, positioning themselves in opposition to mainstream neoliberal agendas. To quote the most recent UN Global Sustainable Development Report, “Business-as-usual will not deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 or even 2050, yet the Goals are the survival kit behind the transformation process that the planet needs” (UNDESA, 2023, p. 39).

However, if we analyse UN’s (2019a, 2023c) latest and previous Global Sustainable Development Reports, written by an independent group of scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, one of their implicit findings is that there are obstacles preventing the effective implementation of LNOB within the framework of the SDGs, as the data presented on global progress toward the targets outlined in the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda shows that these objectives are far from being achieved.

In this context, the 2023 UN Progress Chart states that “a midpoint evaluation of SDG progress on the journey to 2030 reveals significant challenges. Insight derived from the latest global-level data and custodian agencies analysis paints a concerning picture” (UN, 2023, p. 2). Indeed, the 2023 UN Global Sustainable Development Report asserts:

Progress has been halted in many areas, partly as a consequence of a confluence of crises – the ongoing pandemic, rising inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, and planetary, environmental and economic distress, along with regional and national unrest, conflicts, and natural disasters. As a result, overall progress towards the 2030 Agenda and the Goals has been severely disrupted in the last three years, yet every inch of progress matters and counts. (UN, 2023, p. xvii)

Nevertheless, the chosen title of this policy document, “Times of Crisis, Times of Change”, can be interpreted as a resilient (re)call for social transformation,⁵ because, as stated by the Secretary-General, it “helps to shine new light on transformative processes and practices that can help move the world from commitment to action, and from declaration to delivery” (p. xiii). In this sense, if we consider the LNOB promise to be a reflection of ideology, as suggested by Althusser (2014), rather than a mere rhetorical phenomenon, we can reflect on how it impacts written discourses, institutions, and practices. Indeed, based on (i) the definition of discourse as a communicational device used for mediating social structures, as suggested by Walsh (2014), it is possible to understand that through written political discourses “certain things are made relevant while others are minimized, shared understandings of common problems are constructed or contested” (p. 6); and (ii) the definition of ideology provided by James and Steger (2014), as “patterned clusters of normatively imbued ideas and concepts, including

5 In this regard, the UN 2023 Report provides “a stylized model to help unpack and understand the transformation process through a systematic and structured approach, suggesting that a successful transformation can be considered in three phases – emergence, acceleration and stabilization” (UN, 2023d, p. xxiv).

particular representations of power relations" (p. 423), it is possible to question whether the adoption of the LNOB pledge could be seen as a turning point in global governance and an inversion of recent neoliberal trends that threaten the values that define our common heritage, as Giroux (2008) argues.

ANALYSING PORTUGAL'S ALIGNMENT WITH GLOBAL GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS PROPOSED BY LNOB

This section of the article analyses the way in which the UN agenda influences Portuguese adult education policy. I will initially focus on the frontstage, looking at Portuguese written discourse on lifelong learning policy and the way the UN system's LNOB motto has, or has not, been integrated into the public sociopolitical normative space in which socioeducational life is experienced, both by political actors, and by the people at whom their performances are aimed.

According to Permanent Mission of Portugal to the United Nations (2023),

Portugal remains committed to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and dedicated to eradicating poverty, fighting inequalities, promoting fair, inclusive, and equitable global sustainable development based on human rights and dignity and the 'build back better' and 'leave no one behind' (LNOB) principles.

After the 2016 general election, which represented a shift from centre right to centre left at the national level and the consolidation of the framework in which adult education is considered a human right (Barros, 2023), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs assumed responsibility for the overall coordination of "Strategy Portugal 2030" (Council of Ministers, 2020), in coordination with the Ministry of Planning and Infrastructure. This is fully aligned with the international 2030 Agenda, including responsibility for monitoring and reporting on progress towards the SDGs. Within this Framework, "networks of focal points" and several "specialised working groups" were created, for example, the National Institute for Statistics representatives at the UN "Working Group on Interlinkages of SDG Statistics" (see UNDESA, n.d.-b). Simultaneously, the government departments responsible for the implementation of the SDGs at the sectoral level were also defined. More recently, a high-level committee (Monitoring Committee) was created to supervise and evaluate the implementation of the SDGs and comment on planned activities (see Council of Ministers, 2023).

At times when global governance also operates through monitoring mechanisms and soft policy tools, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) act as roadmaps at the national level, within the context of UN System global governance. These reports are available online and are presented as being intended to "facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda", and to "strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilize

multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals” (High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, n.d.). It is worth noting that these VNRs work closely with other policy tools and mechanisms, such as the “2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator”,⁶ and the cooperation funding framework based on the UN’s (2019b) Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.

Portuguese Voluntary National Reviews

In terms of contemporary global governance, Portugal has presented two VNRs at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development, which is the main platform established by the UN for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the global level and can be considered the apex of the governance structure for SDG implementation. The first HLPF meeting was held in 2013, when it replaced the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), created in the context of the Millennium Goals, predecessor to the SDGs. Today, the HLPF meets annually under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council. In 2017, Portugal presented its first VNR (Portugal, 2017), in which it underlined “the active role in drafting the document adopted at the Summit, including in the establishment of the common position to be taken by the European Union” (p. 6). It also underscored the country’s involvement in other ongoing multilateral processes that aim to align policies and instruments with the SDGs. This included the creation of an “SDG contact network” for the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, and the adoption of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development SDG “Action Plan”. At the UN System level, the first VNR emphasised the need for “structured co-operation and complementarity between the different actors at the global, regional and national levels” (Portugal, 2017, p. 6).

The commitment to international mechanisms that aim to consolidate the human rights-based approach to public policy making was primarily presented through references to measures for achieving SDG4, underscoring that:

Portugal is a party to most of the core treaties that address the universal right to education, with a view to the full development of the human personality. These are: the Charter of the United Nations (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1988); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); the World Declaration on Education for All (1990); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006); and the Incheon Declaration (2015). (Portugal, 2017, pp. 26–27).

6 The “2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator” is a collaborative initiative of the UNDESA and The Partnering Initiative (TPI), in collaboration with the UN Office for Partnerships, UN Global Compact, and the UN Development Coordination Office. It published a Practical Guide to building high impact multi-stakeholder partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals in 2020 (see Stibbe et al., 2020).

In terms of decisions on adult education and policies promoting action, the Portuguese Government relaunched the sector in 2017, following a period of political austerity, during which adult education was neglected. The VNR states:

By recognizing the need for continued learning throughout life and the low qualification of the Portuguese adult population, education and training for adults has also been a priority field of improvement, namely with the creation of the Programa Qualifica (2016), that aims to guide, train and certify about 1 million adults with low qualification, until 2020, through a network of 300 centres distributed around the country, in close collaboration with the education sector and the labour market. (Portugal, 2017, p. 28)

This political will has been maintained ever since, and the most recent Report on the State of Education, published in 2022 by the National Board of Education (CNE, 2022), presents a generally positive panorama of the state of adult education in Portugal. For instance, it shows the continuous investment in the Qualify Program and the resulting expansion of the network of Qualify Centres, which numbered 319 in 2021 (CNE, 2022, p. 151), distributed throughout the country (including the archipelagos). The report also highlights the increased diversity of public provision⁷ (basic and secondary) for adults and the positive level of participation, particularly when compared to the other 27 EU countries,⁸ where young adults, aged 25 to 34, show higher levels of participation in organised training activities than older adults, aged 55 to 64 (CNE, 2022, p. 148).

Six years later, Portugal presented its second VNR (Portugal, 2023) at the 2023 HLPF held in New York under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, on the theme of "Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels". According to the Summary published by the President of the 2023 HLPF, "a total of 38 countries presented voluntary national reviews, of which 1 was presenting for the first time, 36 for the second time, and 1 for the third time. The European Union also presented its first voluntary review" (UN Economic and Social Council, 2023, p. 1). One key takeaway from the general discussions was the recognition that "the commitment to leave no one behind must be reaffirmed" (UN Economic and Social Council, 2023, p. 2).

The 2023 Portuguese VNR publicly restated the commitment to implementing the SDGs:

Portugal is completely engaged with the 2030 Agenda, remaining fully committed to eradicating poverty, fighting inequalities, and promoting a global,

7 Current certified training provision includes Adult Education and Training courses (EFA), Recurrent Education (ER), Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competencies (RVCC), Certified Modular Training (FMC), Basic Skills Training (FCB), and Portuguese Host Language (PLA) which replaced Portuguese for Speakers of Other Languages (PFOL) in 2020. Current stratified data on each can also be found in this publication (CNE, 2022, pp. 147–179).

8 For more information on the interrelatedness of UN and EU SDGs, see European Commission (2019).

fair, equitable and inclusive sustainable development, based on the respect for human rights and the principle of human dignity [...] This journey has reinforced our belief that a holistic and comprehensive approach is fundamental. (Portugal, 2023, p. iii)

When analysing progress on SDG4 in the field of adult education, the 2023 Portuguese VNR states:

The objectives of modernising vocational education are to be achieved by setting up specialised technology centres which seek to adapt supply to the needs of the business world; expanding the Qualifica Programme which promotes the qualification of the adult population and lifelong learning; and by promoting the fight against dropping out of higher education, by reducing course fees, increasing social support for students and increasing investment in higher education for adults through the diversification and adaptation of the educational offer. (Portugal, 2023, pp. 62–63)

Indeed, the Qualify Program has been expanded by a recent law (Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, 2023) establishing the “Qualify Industry Programme”, aimed at micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the industrial sector and “intended to support the qualification processes and retraining of workers, preventing future unemployment”. This indicates a reassessment of market demands in terms of adult education in the context of the digital economy. This reprioritisation can also be seen in the “Agenda 2030 Indicators for Portugal 2015/2021” published by the National Institute for Statistics (INE, 2022), which contained no statistics on adult education, with the sole exception of digital skills. It states that:

according to the results of the Survey on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) usage in private households carried out in 2021, 55% of the resident population aged 16 to 74 years old had digital skills at basic or above basic level, 7.6 pp higher than in 2015. (INE, 2022, p. 83)

Meanwhile, in the Country Profiles available through the online Statistics Division of the UNDESA, Portugal is only mentioned in a statistical note, also concerning digital skills, which states that in 2021, “the gender parity index (female per 100 male) for youth/adults who were able to write a computer program using a specialized programming language was 0.4” (UNDESA, n.d.-a).

This panorama had previously been highlighted in the context of the key national conference held in 2018 under the auspices of the National Board of Education on the topic of “LNOB as a departure moment”, which led to the drafting of the most recent National Recommendations on Adult Education and Training.

Integration of the LNOB motto into national public sociopolitical normative space

Indeed, a member of the Board of Directors of the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education stated at the 2018 key national conference that,

In the top 10 areas of education and training with the highest number of certifications we find sectors that are levers for economic development, given our business and demographic reality and the current situation, such as support services for children and young people, commerce, hotels and restaurants, metallurgy and metalworking, electricity and energy and the construction and repair of motor vehicles. (Valente, 2020, p. 82)

Despite the emphasis on vocational reskilling of the Portuguese adult population in these discussions, the resulting 2019 Recommendations on Adult Education and Training, as a strategic policy document, clearly acknowledge that in order to be sustainable and accomplish the LNOB pledge, adult education must question both the neoliberal belief in learning solely for economic purposes, where individualistic competitive skills take precedence over the ability to cooperate, and the tendency to disregard older adults' right to education beyond retirement age. As such, this national policy document recommends a regionalist strategy for the adult education sector, prioritising (i) policy production on the municipal level and (ii) a bottom-up approach that seeks to enhance the role of educators and researchers in policy-making, which slows the transformation processes, but compensates for this with deeper and more sustainable long-term results (CNE, 2020, p. 219).

Finally, it is interesting to note that the spirit of these recommendations is only partially reflected in the model adopted in Portugal for the coordination and monitoring of SDG implementation, in terms of regionalism, e.g., for the composition of the Portuguese Monitoring Committee.⁹ Indeed, the model perpetuates the political tendency to restrict access to effective participation in the decision-making processes, which remain firmly in the hands of the usual policy actors moving between networks of global governance. Looking, for example, at planned initiatives to accelerate the transition to sustainable development in Portugal, experts appointed by the Competence Centre for Planning, Policy and Foresight in Public Administration (PlanAPP, n.d.) will be largely responsible for developing a National Roadmap for Sustainable Development 2030, identifying, mapping and monitoring national public policy and other instruments that contribute to the implementation of the SDGs, and leading the impact assessment of its accelerated short-term implementation, in conjunction with other public and private entities.

⁹ According to Resolution n. ° 5/2023 of the Council of Ministers, of 23rd January, the members are: a) a representative of the ministry of the presidency, who presides; b) a representative of the ministry of foreign affairs; c) one representative from each of the Regional Governments; d) a representative of the Economic and Social Council; e) a representative of the National Association of Portuguese Municipalities; f) a representative of the National Association of Parishes; g) three personalities of recognised merit selected by the other members.

In this regard, one of the remaining challenges¹⁰ for education policy researchers and educators in the global governance era is how to gain access to the policymaking process and play an active role in the design of initiatives and practices and the monitoring and reporting of the implementation of SDG4, which is inherently linked to the other SDGs and the wholesale transformation of the way we, as humans, inhabit planet Earth.

CONCLUSION: “IMAGINE ALL THE PEOPLE SHARING ALL THE WORLD...” AND LNOB

The Prime Minister of Portugal stated in the last VNR:

In 2023, we are halfway to 2030. The challenges to full implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs are many and demanding. Nonetheless, Portugal remains, as in 2015, ready to actively engage with all national and international stakeholders in order to succeed in achieving the ambitious goals we have set and which today, in view of recent crises, are more crucial than ever. These remain everyone’s goals, our universal goals, leaving no one behind. Together we can change the world! (Portugal, 2023, p. iii)

This article has focused mainly on the symbolic power of the LNOB motto, disseminated by the UN 2017 Shared Framework on *Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development* and its impact on national education policy agendas. In the Portuguese scenario studied, this motto has proven to be an efficient pivot towards a renewed humanistic approach in written policy discourse, acting as “global policy-speak”.

Portugal’s alignment with the global governance approach proposed by LNOB, and its recent adoption by the EU, could indicate a shift in policy production, with less focus placed on neoliberal priorities. However, the intensity, effectiveness, and environmental impact of the promised sustainable measures to leave no one behind requires further research, above all because scientific data on progress towards the SDGs does not yet allow us to “imagine all the people sharing all the world” in a way that is sustainable, ethical and just.

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10 Theoretical considerations as to why researchers and educators of teachers/educators should be included in educational global governance can be found, among other contributions, in the conceptual model composed of four specific dimensions discussed by Milana and Tarozzi (2021).

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