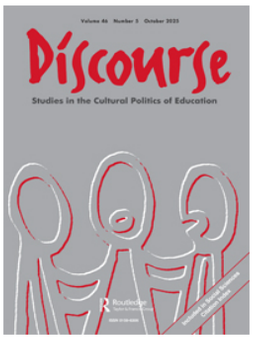

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From Finland to the world: interrogating the global learning crisis

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ABSTRACT

The 'learning crisis', often framed as an urgent challenge of educational access and quality, masks deeper structural and geopolitical inequities. This article critically examines the narrative of the learning crisis through decolonial and critical perspectives, highlighting how intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), predominantly led by the Global North countries, construct and perpetuate this crisis narrative. Drawing on interviews with 23 Finnish education experts working in UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, the study explores the systemic challenges and power dynamics that shape global education governance. The findings reveal international organisations' continuous reliance on narrow, technical and short-term solutions that overlook the specific characteristics of the socio-economic and cultural contexts where they intervene, perpetuating cycles of dependency and inequality in the countries of the Global South. The article calls for a shift towards contextually grounded, equitable, and decolonial approaches to education reform, emphasising the need for genuine collaboration and local leadership in addressing global educational disparities.

KEYWORDS

Learning crisis; intergovernmental organisations; education development; decolonial approaches; Finnish education experts

Introduction

> Education is the key to personal development and the future of societies. It unlocks opportunities and narrows inequalities. It is the bedrock of informed, tolerant societies and a primary driver of sustainable development. (António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2020)
>
> … .today, beset by inequalities and struggling to adjust to the needs of the 21st century, education is in crisis. (António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2022)

Education is often heralded as one of the most profound forces for personal and societal transformation, an institution woven into the aspirations of individuals and the fabric of communities. As the UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed in 2020, education serves as 'the key to personal development and the future of societies', a powerful force and a fundamental human right that opens doors to opportunity, narrows inequalities, and cultivates informed, tolerant, and resilient communities. Yet, in a striking parallel, this very institution is also described by policymakers, including Guterres himself, as 'beset by inequalities and struggling to adjust to the needs of the twenty-first century'. Echoing the conclusions of many international development reports and expert assessments, he warns that education is in crisis – instead of leading toward the assured path to progress, it is now a system faltering under the weight of unfulfilled promises and persistent inequities.

This tension – between education as an agent of progress and as a system in crisis – raises deeper questions about the global architecture of knowledge and power dynamics that surround it. How did this crisis emerge within an institution so widely celebrated as transformative? How does the framing of a 'learning crisis' serve to mobilise resources, shape policies, and direct the flow of development interventions? Why, despite decades of investment and reform, do educational inequalities persist? And crucially, who shapes the narrative of crisis, and to what end?

This article examines the narrative of the 'learning crisis', often referred to as 'education crisis'[1], from critical and decolonial perspectives. Drawing on Whyte's (2021) concept of 'crisis epistemology,' we interrogate

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how intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) frame this crisis in ways that legitimise particular forms of knowledge and authority, while marginalising the practices and perspectives of communities that may not conform to global benchmarks. We hypothesise that what is often framed as a 'learning crisis' may, in reality, be an 'international development crisis' rooted in the very structures of dependency and control that shape the global education landscape (Silova, 2018).

We explore the dynamics of international development through the perspectives of 23 Finnish education experts working within UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, we discuss their reflections on the learning crisis, their views on its causes, and their insights into the role of their organisations in addressing this issue. Finnish experts bring a unique vantage point: as insiders embedded in IGOs and as professionals shaped by a national education system renowned for its equity, trust-based governance, and rejection of high-stakes testing. This dual perspective uniquely positions them to engage critically with global education reforms, questioning how well externally designed solutions align with diverse educational contexts and lived realities. Their perspectives are discussed alongside official IGOs' reports and public communications, sketching a broader architecture of knowledge that underpins – and often perpetuates – the dominant narrative of a global 'learning crisis'[2].

The emergence of the learning crisis: historical and theoretical perspectives

The narrative of education as 'in crisis' has long shaped international development, influencing how education systems are governed, funded, and reformed. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) established education as a universal right, the post-war era increasingly portrayed it as a system requiring reform. The Cold War era amplified education's geopolitical importance, particularly after the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957, linking education performance to national security and global competition. As humanist ideals gave way to technocratic goals, the crisis rhetoric became institutionalised reinforcing measurable outcomes and workforce readiness over broader transformative aims (Silova, 2010; Mundy & Verger, 2016; Spring, 2018). By the late 1960s, global education governance began to consolidate around coordinated action. The 1967 International Conference on the World Crisis in Education, for example, framed educational reform as a shared global responsibility (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). Organisations like UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank have since mobilised crisis narratives to direct resources, set global benchmarks, and influence national education policies (Menashy, 2018; Sultana, 2019).

In the 1980s and 1990s, a pivotal shift occurred from viewing education as a collective social good to focusing on learning as a measurable individual outcome. This transition coincided with the rise of neoliberalism and its emphasis on quantifiable metrics such as literacy and numeracy at the expense of humanist ideals of education as a vehicle for personal and societal transformation. Initiatives like the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforced this shift, embedding education within global development agendas and solidifying its status as both an instrument and indicator of progress (Hossain & Hinckey, 2019; Windzio & Martens, 2022).

Today's global education architecture – largely driven by the Global North – is characterised by what Severino and Ray (2010) call 'hypercollective action,' with international organisations orchestrating reform efforts through policy tools, funding streams, and cross-country benchmarking. Reports such as UNESCO's *The Global Learning Crisis* (2013) or the World Bank's *The State of Global Learning Poverty* (2022) exemplify how the crisis rhetoric sustains a sense of urgency and drives intervention. However, these narratives do more than diagnose problems – they shape what kinds of policies are deemed legitimate, often favouring short-term technical solutions over systemic reform.

Despite decades of investment, the learning crisis persists (Silova et al., 2025). It is routinely cited by politicians, academics, and international organisations alike to highlight the gap between enrolment and actual learning, particularly in the world's most vulnerable regions (e.g. Friedlander et al., 2019; Kabay, 2021; UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO et al., 2021; World Bank, 2019). UNICEF (2020) estimates that over 600 million children and adolescents are not reaching minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. This enduring crisis calls into question not only the effectiveness of past reforms but also the frameworks through which the crisis itself has been constructed. So, the question remains: why, after seven decades of global

development efforts, does the learning crisis not only persist but seem to deepen, defying the lofty promises of progress and transformation?

Crisis epistemology: framing and legitimising international development interventions

The persistent invocation of the learning crisis aligns with what Whyte (2021) describes as 'crisis epistemology', a narrative strategy that constructs challenges as unprecedented emergencies necessitating immediate, solutions-oriented responses. This framing positions international organisations as indispensable actors with the expertise and authority to address systemic failures in education. Yet, it often obscures the historical and structural conditions – such as colonial legacies, geopolitical hierarchies, and economic inequities – that underpin educational disparities (Escobar, 2011; Mignolo, 2011).

The crisis narrative is widely critiqued for its reductive framing and underlying assumptions. In education, Schweisfurth (2022) highlights international organisations' narrow focus on foundational learning, digitalisation, and teaching data, which prioritises literacy and numeracy over critical areas like the arts, social-emotional learning, and contextual needs. Other scholars note how global metrics prioritise neoliberal logics, sidelining cultural and linguistic diversity (Silova et al., 2019; Benavot & Smith, 2020; Fischman et al., 2019; Wulff, 2020).

This framing legitimises a narrow, technocratic vision of education reform that prioritises short-term solutions and technical fixes, while bypassing contextually grounded, systemic reforms and marginalising local agency. As Ahmed (2023) provocatively asks, has the international development community been 'crying wolf too often', prioritising short-term fixes that risk perpetuating existing disparities, while diverting attention from structural reform?

This tension becomes particularly evident in how organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank leverage the learning crisis narrative as a key source of institutional legitimacy. These organisations position themselves as critical actors capable of addressing systemic failures in education systems worldwide. By identifying a range of 'direct' and 'indirect' causes, they construct a comprehensive, yet externally focused, diagnosis of the crisis. For example, direct causes include chronic underfunding of education systems, inadequate teacher preparation, children's lack of readiness to learn, ineffective school leadership, substandard teaching materials (e.g. culturally insensitive textbooks), and limited access to technology (UNESCO, 2013, 2014; World Bank, 2018). Indirect causes stem from factors external to schools, including families' economic hardships that prevent the fulfilment of basic needs like health, nutrition, and safety, as well as barriers such as long distances to school and unstable socio-political conditions (Friedlander et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2013).

While recognising real challenges, such diagnoses often externalise the causes of educational challenges, attributing them to factors like insufficient national funding, socio-political instability, or incapacity of the Global South. Simultaneously, they position the Global North as an example to emulate, reinscribing Western/Northern 'best practices' as the only viable solutions (for critique, see Silova, 2010, 2018). For example, Finland is frequently showcased – by the Finnish government and the IGOs – as a universal exemplar, with hundreds of delegations of policymakers trekking to Finland to 'find out what Finland has done to achieve good-quality learning for all' (Reinikka et al., 2018, p. 6). The narrative emphasises Finland's achievements in addressing the learning crisis, positioning its strategies as universally applicable and further entrenching the dominance of Northern approaches in global education reform. Yet, these narratives seldom address how the structural dynamics of global education governance – or the very practices of these organisations – contribute to the persistence of disparities (Silova, 2018; Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). These framings position international organisations as indispensable actors in resolving the crisis, while deflecting attention from the systemic inequities embedded within their interventions.

Furthermore, critics argue that the priorities of IGOs are disproportionately shaped by the interests of the Global North (Silva & Oliveira, 2021). This hierarchical, top-down approach exerts a profound influence on national policymaking in the Global South, often curtailing these nations' ability to exercise sovereignty over their public education systems (Menashy, 2018; Sultana, 2019). While initiatives such as EFA, MDGs, and SDGs profess noble aims, they are frequently critiqued for perpetuating neocolonial dynamics and reinforcing hegemonic power structures (Menashy, 2018; Sultana, 2019; Tikly, 2004).

This exposes a fundamental paradox at the heart of the learning crisis narrative: although it is framed as an urgent plea for global collaboration, it often serves to legitimise practices that preserve rather than challenge

entrenched power dynamics. This paper examines this paradox from the inside – drawing on interviews with education experts working in some of the major IGOs – to unpack the underlying assumptions, vested interests, and power dynamics that perpetuate and legitimise the crisis narrative.

Researching insights of Finnish education experts: behind the data and methods

This study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with 23 Finnish education experts with professional experience in intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), including 18 experts that have been affiliated with UNESCO and UNICEF, and 5 with the World Bank at least until 2022. The participants – 15 women and 8 men – held a range of positions, from junior education experts to senior experts, working in headquarters and country offices. Most held at least master's degree from Finnish institutions.[3] The sample began with a list of Finnish education experts provided – with consent – by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and was expanded through snowball sampling, as initial interviewees recommended other Finnish professionals with IGO experience.

The decision to focus on Finnish education experts was intentional, given Finland's internationally recognised reputation for educational excellence and strong tradition of development cooperation and development (Lamberg, 2020; Takala, 1998). Since the 1970s, Finland has prioritised equity, trust, inclusion, and well-being as central values of its education system, culminating in globally lauded outcomes, such as top-tier results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (e.g. Niemi, 2016; Niemi & Sinnemäki, 2019; OECD, 2013). These achievements, coupled with Finland's absence of national testing in basic education and a system built on teacher professionalism, have positioned it as a 'global brand' in education development (Reinikka et al., 2018). From this perspective, the focus on Finnish experts offers a unique lens through which to examine the interplay between global and local education paradigms. These individuals navigate dual allegiances: the values and priorities of their host organisations and those rooted in Finland's distinct educational philosophy (Santos et al., 2022). This study investigates how Finnish experts reconcile these potentially conflicting stances, as well as how their perspectives align or diverge from the institutional worldviews of the organisations in which they work.

We define expertise following Shanteau (1992) as high-level professional competence and draw on Collins and Evans (2007) concept of contributory expertise, which includes a combination of theoretical knowledge and tacit, practice-derived skills (Wilson, 2006, p. 502). This approach underscores the multidimensional nature of expertise, particularly in the context of international development. The interview data were analysed alongside IGOs official reports and web-based materials to contextualise the narratives of the Finnish experts within the declared mandates of these organisations, including their articulation of the 'learning crisis'. While participants were affiliated with different IGOs, this study did not aim to conduct a comparative institutional analysis. Rather, our focus was on recurring narratives and critiques that cut across organisational mandates. We employed a mixed inductive and deductive content analysis approach (Schreier, 2014). Initial coding categories – such as the roles of IGOs and the construction of the learning crisis – were drawn from existing literature and then refined through iterative engagement with the data, allowing us to explore both the alignment and dissonance between expert perspectives and institutional discourses.

Interrogating the learning crisis: insights from Finnish experts in international development

While many of the concerns raised by interviewees may resemble broader critiques of international development, their framing is inflected by Finland's unique educational ethos – one that emphasises systemic trust, teacher autonomy, and holistic well-being over standardisation. These underlying values shape how Finnish experts perceive the limits of externally imposed reforms and the tensions between technical fixes and contextual relevance. Positioned within IGOs, Finnish experts often navigate the tension between these values and the institutional mandates of their organisations. Research suggests that, over time, professionals in these roles adapt their perspectives and practices to align with the dominant narratives and priorities of the organisations they represent (Santos et al., 2022; Santos & Pekkola, 2022, 2023; Väyrynen & Riekki, 2025). This alignment not only legitimises the framing of the learning crisis as a real and urgent issue but also entrenches institutional approaches that often narrow the scope of the problem, particularly in the Global South. By reproducing

these dominant narratives, international organisations solidify their influence over education policies and practices, often sidelining alternative perspectives that challenge the structural and systemic inequities underpinning the crisis. However, the findings of this study reveal a more complex picture: while some Finnish experts adopt these institutional perspectives, they also attempt to challenge the system.

The majority of interviewees reiterated familiar narratives often presented in international development reports, framing the learning crisis as a disconnect between education access and quality. This well-rehearsed argument underscores a common concern among the international expert community: while significant progress has been made in getting children into schools, the outcomes of their education often fall far short of expectations. As one interviewee summarised it, 'we have kids in school but they're not learning in school' (ID2). Another interviewee noted that the crisis is particularly acute in primary education, where foundational skills are most lacking: 'It's in the basic education, the fact that kids don't learn basic skills: reading, writing, numeracy' (ID8). While this critique identifies a real problem, its reliance on universal metrics of success, such as literacy and numeracy, perpetuates a narrow vision of education rooted in Western paradigms – that is, educational models that prioritise standardised testing, individual achievement, and formal schooling as the primary site of learning. These paradigms often disregard alternative epistemologies and learning practices embedded in local cultures, community life, and oral traditions, particularly in non-Western contexts. Several interviewees problematised this universalising narrative, pointing out that the so-called '*global* learning crisis' is not truly global if context is taken seriously into consideration – the 'crisis' have different meanings in different contexts. Reflecting on their extensive experience working in several African countries, one interviewee explained:

> … we can talk about a global learning crisis but that's defined by the international agencies, and we need to look at the local as well … we need to see the learning crisis in every context. It has to be a context-relevant and shared understanding. (ID3)

When zooming in on the 'local', the interviewees highlighted persistent shortcomings in the international development industry – most notably its failure to address systemic inequities and its reliance on externally driven frameworks that marginalise local priorities. While Global South practitioners are increasingly present in international organisations, our findings suggest that structural hierarchies often constrain their influence. Rather than reinforcing a North – South binary, we aim to expose how power circulates within development architectures, frequently reproducing inequities even under the banner of inclusion. The following sections delve deeper into these issues, highlighting three key insights from the perspectives of Finnish education experts: a lack of systemic approaches, structural inequalities and geopolitical hierarchies, and a white saviour complex.

Lack of systemic approaches

Although the learning crisis is often framed through a narrowly familiar lens of access and quality, some Finnish experts suggest that the issue is far more complex and deeply rooted in a lack of systemic approach to education reform. This is especially common in contexts where rapid pushes to increase school enrolment – such as those inspired by the MDGs and later the SDGs – were not accompanied by the necessary infrastructure or resources. Reflecting on their experience in multiple African and Asian countries, one interviewee argues:

> There was a lot of push partly from the MDGs to getting kids into school but there wasn't a full consideration or reflection of what that means in terms of making sure that the infrastructure is there to support the learning to happen. (…) I just don't think there are enough resources to accompany that massive growth in access. So, we've ended up with too many children in schools without enough teachers. In addition, these teachers aren't educated well enough. So, the teachers lack their skills and then we don't have enough schools. We don't have enough materials. We don't have a lot of things that you actually need for a child to learn. … it does take so much more than just having a classroom. (ID15)

This critique was echoed in discussions with other interviewees about human resources, particularly the undervaluation and under-preparation of teachers, as well as their education, salaries, work conditions, motivation, and recognition. Reflecting on their experience in Nepal, one participant noted, 'Teacher qualifications are very low, they're underpaid, unappreciated, and unable to fully focus on their profession' (ID10). This statement underscores the vicious cycle of low investment in teachers, where poor remuneration and lack of respect for the profession lead to demotivation, which in turn hampers learning outcomes for

students. The undervaluation of teachers stands in stark contrast to contexts such as Finland, where teaching is regarded as one of the most respected and aspirational professions. Although the interviewees did not explicitly engage in cross-national comparison, the contrast invites reflection on how deeply the role of teachers is linked to the overall health and equity of an education system.

Short-term interventions exacerbate these challenges. For example, brief teacher training workshops, often offered as part of international development programmes, fail to address the depth of preparation required for effective teaching. One interviewee criticised this approach by explaining how 'one- or two-weeks teacher training programmes on school management' cannot 'replace an education' (ID7). Such programmes, while well-intentioned, lack the continuity and depth needed to create sustainable improvements in teacher capacity. They also risk creating frustration among educators who feel unsupported once these programmes end, further undermining morale.

This broader lens on the teaching profession connects to a critical observation about the lack of understanding a systemic nature of educational challenges, resulting in the failure (or perhaps even unwillingness) to fully understand 'the underlying causes of the situation' (ID10). This perspective underscores the importance of addressing not just individual aspects of education reform, such as teacher training, but also the deeper structural and contextual factors that shape educational systems. It calls for a shift away from fragmented, technical solutions and toward recognising education as an interconnected ecosystem shaped by both structural conditions and human relationships. The following reflection builds on this idea, highlighting the necessity of a systemic approach that values teachers not only as facilitators of learning but as vital contributors to a just and functional education system:

> Kids can go to school and they're hungry. It's very difficult to concentrate on learning if you're hungry. Of course, if the school is not able to accommodate the learning needs of the kids, it's about the teacher resource, it's about the leadership, it's about the whole system. So it's a systemic problem. Again, the system can be in place and the system can be ideal, but if you don't have the school staff, especially teachers who actually love what they're doing, who get a kick out of the fact that the kids are learning, who are able to be there … So it's *the whole system approach* … (ID4, emphasis added)

By acknowledging these complexities, this perspective advocates for a more integrated, contextually grounded approach to reform. By recognising education as deeply embedded in broader social and systemic inequities, it underscores the limitations of development initiatives that fail to address these interconnected layers holistically. This reality is brought up in another interview, revealing the impact of structural and societal conditions on education and highlighting how external factors, often overlooked by both donors and education ministries, erode students' ability to engage with learning:

> … children haven't had the nutrition they needed in the early years, so their brains are not ready to learn anything, or they come to school when they're hungry and they cannot focus, or the girls are having their period and they cannot come to school, because there's no latrines, so they have to stay away for a week per month … . there are a lot of factors to do with the education sector, but then there's also so much to do with the outside things that are not really considered by the donors or the education ministries, because it's not education, so why bother. (ID19)

This testimony starkly illustrates the limitations of focusing exclusively on internal educational mechanisms while neglecting the external forces that shape students' lives. Challenges such as malnutrition, inadequate menstrual health support, and a lack of basic infrastructure are not merely logistical hurdles but are deeply symptomatic of systemic neglect. These issues disrupt not only individual learners but entire communities, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and inequity. More critically, they reflect a failure to recognise education as deeply interwoven with broader social, economic, and cultural dynamics. To focus narrowly on what happens within school walls, without addressing the socio-structural realities outside them, is to misunderstand the very nature of the problem.

Structural inequalities and geopolitical hierarchies

Structural inequalities and geopolitical hierarchies profoundly shape the challenges faced by education systems globally, perpetuating disparities in funding, access, and outcomes. These dynamics are deeply entrenched within global systems of power that dictate how resources are distributed, how interventions are designed, and whose priorities are prioritised. Funding is a prime example of how these inequalities

manifest. While there is often a narrative of resource scarcity, participants suggest that the issue lies in unequal distribution rather than a lack of money. One interviewee highlights this imbalance, arguing that '*there's enough money, there's not a lack of money, it's just not being shared equally*' (ID17, emphasis added). Poor allocation of resources reflects a broader systemic failure to prioritise equity, leaving the most marginalised communities without adequate support. This imbalance perpetuates cycles of dependency, where external aid becomes a substitute for sustainable investment by local governments.

Interviewees also draw attention to the volatile nature of funding associated with international development initiatives. For example, they note that funding from international organisations often arrives as a temporary influx, with insufficient consideration for how local governments will sustain these programmes once external resources are withdrawn. One interviewee offers a particularly pointed critique of this dynamic, describing how such interventions can inadvertently disrupt existing systems and leave communities worse off than before:

> Say there is a sudden cash flow for the funding of schools in a certain district, where schools are needed, but then after the funding arrives, state funding halts because of course we have this new international funding, … so there's this dynamic where there is an intervention that may actually … sort of comes and goes and then may change the ways that the state sees their role in providing support or in long-term support or even in paving roads, and then when this funding then abruptly ends, the community or the area is left in a worse scenario than they were before the influx of this said funding. (ID2)

Such dynamics reveal the consequences of donor-driven interventions that prioritise measurable outcomes and quick wins over sustainable, locally rooted solutions. When external funding displaces state responsibility, it undermines the very foundations of public education systems, creating cycles of dependency and instability. Once funding is withdrawn, communities are left without the resources they had come to rely on and are disempowered in their ability to advocate for systemic change. Moreover, these dynamics can erode trust in both international organisations and local governments. Communities may perceive these interventions as fleeting and unreliable, reinforcing a sense of instability and neglect. The abrupt cessation of funding not only disrupts ongoing efforts but can also create structural imbalances, where temporary improvements collapse under the weight of unsustainable efforts.

The inequitable distribution of resources reflects but one facet of the broader structural inequalities that underpin the international development industry. As the interviewees noted, these inequalities are deeply embedded within societal hierarchies that prioritise certain groups while systematically excluding others. Reflecting on their work in an Asian context, one interviewee explained how these dynamics are normalised:

> In this region, the global learning crisis means that anyone who is in the weaker position is left behind, and that's the status quo and that seems not to change. (ID17)

This testimony highlights how systemic exclusion is not merely an unfortunate byproduct of education systems but a fundamental feature of their design. As another interviewee elaborated, the framing of a 'learning crisis' masks the deeper realities of structural inequality:

> … it is not necessarily a learning crisis. It's a crisis of inequality that has gone worse in almost any aspect of the term, inequality when it comes to income, wealth, but also when it comes to education as well. (…) But I think the problem is not primarily the learning problem, it's how we are treating women and children and how we are ignoring this expanding disadvantage we are having in many societies that is then leading into this crisis. (ID6)

This perspective challenges the technical, depoliticised solutions often promoted by international development initiatives. By focusing narrowly on learning outcomes or access metrics, these interventions fail to address the socio-economic and cultural inequalities that shape who have access to quality education and under what conditions. The result is a perpetuation of the very hierarchies that these initiatives claim to dismantle.

Another dimension of this systemic neglect is the devaluation of education itself in many marginalised communities. For families and governments, the historical failure of education systems to deliver meaningful benefits has eroded trust in its transformative potential. As one interviewee explained:

> … One of the challenges is that the community doesn't necessarily expect too much from education, because their history hasn't shown them that education would have led to so much, in their personal experiences. … For most of

> the individuals, they'll see themselves going to school without it having a great impact, and they see their children going to school without necessarily having an impact. (ID13)

This disillusionment reflects a larger cycle of neglect: when education systems fail to deliver meaningful outcomes, communities disengage, which in turn perpetuates underinvestment in education. This cycle is not merely a local phenomenon but a structural consequence of systems that prioritise expansion over quality, access over equity, and performance metrics over meaningful transformation.

The persistent culture of white saviour mentality

While many of the interviewed experts exhibit a critical awareness of the complexities and challenges inherent in international development dynamics, their perspectives reveal an underlying paternalism or a white saviour mentality that either implicitly or explicitly undermines local agency. For instance, one expert (ID16) highlighted the need for development agencies to 'help the Ministry change their processes' and 'make the Ministry listen', reflecting an assumption that external actors know better than local governments about how to improve their education systems. While this approach ostensibly seeks to build long-term sustainability of education reforms (at least in the eyes of the interviewed expert), it reinforces a paternalistic framework where international consultants take on the role of knowledgeable advisors while governments are positioned as incompetent and passive recipients of guidance. Commenting on their work experience in Asia, one interviewee explained the rationale for 'help' as follows:

> … there needs to be long term solutions, to change the whole education system here. Help the ministry change their processes, because we can see that the Ministry is struggling, and they don't know what to do, how to improve, so I think, this advisory role, is trying to set policies on how they can improve their systems. We cannot help ourselves, it needs to come from the Ministry, but we can advise the Ministry, and somehow make the Ministry listen, so that they kind of understand that, OK, these people can help, they actually maybe know what they are doing. (ID16)

Another expert agreed that ' … international organisations should have *this kind of more elevated role* … in terms of coordination, in terms of trying to find the best possible solutions' (ID14, emphasis added). According to one interviewee, such hierarchical, paternalistic relationship happen 'quite often' in various development contexts:

> I can see the advisory role quite often and kind of this hand holding that, OK, you can do like this … no need to panic or no need to give up, that we can, you can actually do something about it. (ID16)

This paternalism is further echoed in the narratives on capacity building. For example, one interviewee acknowledged the 'slow, painful process of developing the capacity of Ministries', as well as training teachers and providing materials (ID13). However, the framing of this effort as a one-way transfer of knowledge from IGOs to local actors perpetuates the colonial trope of the Global North as the locus of expertise. This asymmetry undermines the idea of genuine collaboration, where knowledge and agency are shared equitably.

The critiques extend to the structural inefficiencies within IGOs themselves. As one interviewee explained, IGOs often work in silos, creating conflicts of interest and duplicating efforts even within the same UN agencies:

> … Even within the UN agencies there would be different, conflicting agendas, different kinds of conflicts of interests, who gets what mandate to work with who, what kinds of funds … So even within the UN constellation, there are different kinds of conflicts. (ID14)

This lack of coordination not only reduces the effectiveness of interventions but also compounds the challenges faced by recipient governments. Some interviewees underscore this point, lamenting the competition among organisations and calling for greater collaboration to achieve more meaningful impact (e.g. ID1).

The saviour mentality becomes particularly stark when external agendas overshadow local priorities. One interviewee critiques the influence of IGOs, which often push their own agendas over the priorities of local governments:

> And then there are other players like the World Bank or USAID who have huge influence on what's happening in education, but they may not always follow the government's own priorities. They come with a stronger *own*

> agenda, because they have so much money, they do have that influencing power because the money is there … . (ID19)

This dynamic, described as 'stronger *own* agenda', reflects a neocolonial logic where development is driven by donor interests rather than the needs of the recipient countries. While some interviewees internalise this logic unproblematically, others draw an explicit comparison to colonial practices, noting how IGOs do not involve or empower local actors, and fail to build local capacity, leaving communities dependent on external actors and their systems unchanged:

> … sometimes the organisations come, and they do the things themselves, and they do not include the locals, they do not change the structures, they do not teach the people in that country, they just come and do things for that country, and when they leave, there is nothing left … I think it's a little bit like a colonial thing, also that white men come and give advice and recommendations and then they leave. (ID1)

Some participants take a clear stance against the 'saviour mentality', arguing that international organisations should not dominate the education space, and that leadership should always be in the hands of governments and local actors:

> My view has been that countries solve their problems themselves. There is no this saviour mentality (…) Education is a national mandate, every country wants to be in charge of the education system, and it is so fundamental to citizenship, it's fundamental to being a citizen of whatever country, so these countries finance the system, even the poor ones. Their donors, the North, contribute and provide funding, but I have always advocated for a country-specific approach. You work there in the country, for the country, on the country's terms … (ID8)

The emphasis on country-specific approaches shifts the focus from top-down interventions to genuine partnerships that empower local actors. This requires moving away from viewing development as a one-way transfer of knowledge and resources from the Global North to the Global South. Instead, collaboration must be seen as a two-way exchange, where both sides learn from and contribute to the process. As one interviewee explained,

> We need to have a long-term perspective in how we in the long run develop our cooperation so that it benefits [people] on the ground, that's where we do need competencies, we need skilful people, we need knowledge, and *the knowledge does not come from the North. The North does not solve these problems* (ID3, emphasis added).

In addition to centring local leadership, some interviewees highlighted the potential of international organisations as spaces for fostering dialogue and facilitating the exchange of ideas – in multiple directions. This role, however, must evolve from merely bringing together disparate voices to actively supporting the co-creation of knowledge and solutions: '… *sharing information, what is happening there, what is happening here, to really, building this kind of global knowledge, and sharing it*' (ID21). By creating platforms for dialogue, these spaces could move beyond tokenistic consultations to meaningful collaboration, where local expertise shapes global strategies and vice versa. As several interviewees noted, this requires IGOs to be more intentional in ensuring that the voices of those most affected by education inequalities are centred and amplified. Simultaneously, such an approach requires that the North – along with IGOs and their experts – also learn throughout the process (see ID9).

Although some international experts may explicitly critique the white saviour mentality, their very presence in development contexts often reinforces the structures they seek to challenge. This dynamic often displaces the voices and expertise of local governments, educators, and communities, replacing them with externally designed solutions that may not address neither the nuanced realities on the ground nor the broader geopolitical inequities. By aligning their practices and priorities with the frameworks of international development organisations, some development experts not only fail to resolve the learning crisis but also perpetuate the very inequalities and inefficiencies they claim to address, highlighting the urgent need for a shift toward genuine collaboration and localised leadership in education development.

Reframing the learning crisis: critical reflections and implications

The perspectives of Finnish experts working within IGOs illuminate a critical tension between the narratives they adopt and the systemic realities they encounter. While their alignment with institutional frameworks reinforces the dominant framing of the learning crisis as an issue of access and quality, their reflections

also expose cracks in this narrative – cracks that point to the deeper structural and geopolitical inequities underpinning global education systems. This duality offers fertile ground for engaging with decolonial critiques of international development, which challenge the universalist logics, power asymmetries, and epistemological hierarchies embedded in such frameworks.

Drawing on scholars such as Mignolo (2011) and Escobar (2011), we understand the decolonial critique as a rejection of development's assumed neutrality and a call to rethink the modernity/coloniality nexus that sustains global governance. From this perspective, the learning crisis is not merely an educational failure, but a discursive construction shaped by what Whyte (2021) calls *crisis epistemology* – a framing that legitimates externally driven, technocratic interventions while marginalising alternative knowledges and historical contexts.

In this light, the learning crisis is not as a neutral diagnosis but a symptom of entrenched colonial logics that reduce education to measurable outcomes and impose standardised frameworks across diverse contexts. The focus on literacy and numeracy as universal metrics of success, for instance, perpetuates a narrow, Western-centric vision of education, erasing the social, cultural, and historical specificities of the communities it seeks to serve. Finnish experts' call for contextually relevant approaches and their critiques of externally imposed agendas echo these decolonial critiques, emphasising the need to address the colonial hierarchies that continue to shape international education development. These findings affirm critiques of technocratic and decontextualised reforms (Schweisfurth, 2022; Sultana, 2019), while contributing to recent calls to *unlearn development* from within (Silova et al., 2025). The perspectives of Finnish experts illustrate how dominant scripts are both internalised and contested, pointing to the epistemic tensions that shape international education work. While contextually relevant approaches are a necessary corrective, they are not sufficient to constitute a decolonial practice. The critiques offered by Finnish experts – particularly around whose knowledge is legitimised, how agency is distributed, and what forms of learning are valued – resonate with broader concerns about epistemic violence, extractive logics, and the erasure of alternative worldviews (Silova et al., 2025; Escobar, 2011; Mignolo, 2011). Decoloniality, in this sense, involves not just shifting strategies, but fundamentally rethinking the architecture and purpose of global education development.

Yet, our findings reveal the limitations of these critiques. Although many Finnish experts highlight the inequities perpetuated by IGOs, their perspectives often remain rooted in the hegemonic epistemological frameworks of development (Escobar, 1992, 2011). These frameworks, grounded in Global North ideals and capitalist principles, prioritise growth, efficiency, and standardisation, often sidelining the diverse realities and aspirations of the Global South. The learning crisis discourse itself is embedded in these broader political-economic structures, shaping not only funding flows and institutional mandates, but also the very terms through which educational 'success' is defined.

Even as IGOs are critiqued, the underlying architecture of development cooperation – characterised by its relentless drive toward modernisation – remains largely unchallenged. This disconnect reflects Ahmed's (2023) critique of the mismatch between Global North ideals and Global South realities. The Finnish experts' reflections highlight this dissonance and emphasise the risk of a self-reinforcing cycle in which the learning crisis narrative legitimises interventions that ultimately sustain, rather than disrupt, existing inequities.

Taken together, these insights point toward the need for a more grounded and reciprocal approach to international development. Rather than continuing with top-down, crisis-driven interventions, IGOs might reorient their work toward sustained partnerships that centre local leadership, contextual knowledge, and plural understandings of learning. This does not imply a withdrawal from development altogether, but a transformation of its terms: from technical fixes to relational commitments, from metrics to meaning, and from extractive policy transfer to co-creation.

Ultimately, the framing of the learning crisis risks becoming a self-perpetuating cycle that reinforces the status quo rather than challenging the power dynamics and epistemologies sustaining educational disparities. To break this cycle, international development must move beyond narrowly defined metrics of success and engage with the diverse lived realities of the communities it seeks to serve. This reimagining requires a shift from imposing global solutions to co-creating locally grounded, globally informed futures that prioritise equity, inclusion, and the decolonisation of knowledge and practices. The Finnish experts' dual roles – as both participants in and critics of the development apparatus – offer a critical entry point for this shift.

Notes

1. Here used interchangeably.
2. Authors positionality: Although working in recent years in Finnish higher education institutions, the authors are not Finnish citizens and did not know the interviewees prior to the interviews were performed.
3. Several of the interviewees have worked in more than one of these IGOs, especially within the UN. As Finland is a small country with very few people that worked in such positions, identification within the country is easy to make and for anonymity reasons, no more details can be provided about them.

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