

*Development custodians of the right to education: The mobilization and appropriation of global North discourses by non-state educational organizations in Pakistan*

By Alexis Saba

In the post-2015 era, a new politics of education has arisen that includes an increase in non-state private actors involved in the aid and philanthropic process associated with education (Srivastava & Baur, 2016). Srivastava and Baur also articulate that a new philanthropic governance in education enables actors within this space to bring in a wider range of discourses to justify and promote their actions. This paper will explicate the ways in which non-state educational development organizations in Pakistan mobilize rights, development, and empowerment discourses as means to increase access to their programs on their program websites, policy documents, and donor-facing materials.

As non-governmental and non-state organizations increase their participation delivering social services in Pakistan, these same organizations become custodians for rights-based discourses and take on the role of duty bearer. Under a neoliberal educational landscape, the Pakistani state is “spatialized” (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002) as having failed its responsibility of providing quality education to citizens (Alif Ailaan, 2014). At the same time, non-state and non-governmental service delivery organizations claim an ability to work more closely than the state with marginalized communities. Effective and long-standing relationships with local communities is promoted as a unique asset towards delivering social services more effectively and helping communities achieve “awareness” (*aagahi*) of the right to education and the overall importance and benefits of education.

This paper will present findings from a discourse analysis of Pakistan-based non-governmental and non-state educational providers’ websites and policy documents. This type of analysis allows the author to explore the public-facing ways in which non-state educational organizations mobilize rights discourses and how they are connected to global North discourses of institutionalized rights. At the same time, however, these discourses can be strategic and localized in order to increase access to their schools and raise funds for their organizations. Accompanied alongside and embedded within the mobilization of rights, development, and empowerment discourses, particular deficit discourses of the local communities’ knowledge about the right to education or the benefits of education emerge. This paper will explore this and the following tensions/paradoxes of educational development in conjunction with rights, empowerment, and development discourses:

1. While non-governmental and non-state organizational promises are often emancipatory in their goals and delivery, their work may be bound in some ways to demands and frameworks embedded in hegemonic norms promoted by international and transnational donors and/or agencies (Edwards & Hulme, 1996).

2. Notions of “good” development include working in collaboration with the community but inherent in development projects is the desire to change those exact intended beneficiaries (Kothari, 2005).
3. Within development, the work that strives to empower, develop, and/or better the lives of marginalized communities often draws on assumptions about the intended beneficiaries’ beliefs and values (Christina, 2006).

This work is part of the author’s larger ethnographic dissertation research on rights and “awareness” (*aagahi*) in educational development within non-state organizations.