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The Comparative Analysis of Political Programs Large-N Analyses with Data from International Organizations

Anja P. Jakobi

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Universität Bremen • University of Bremen
Jacobs Universität Bremen • Jacobs University Bremen

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Universität Bremen
Sonderforschungsbereich 597 / Collaborative Research Center 597
Staatlichkeit im Wandel / Transformations of the State
Postfach 33 04 40
D - 28334 Bremen
Tel.:+ 49 421 218-8720
Fax:+ 49 421 218-8721
Homepage: http://www.staatlichkeit.uni-bremen.de

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The Comparative Analysis of Political Programs

Large-N Analyses with Data from International Organizations

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the methodological question of using data from international organizations (IOs) for comparative analysis. It explores how large-N analyses can profit from using different types of data, including text analysis. The paper proceeds as follows: First, it is introduced for which types of research question certain types of IO data might be accurate. Then, data collection of different IOs is presented, distinguishing verbal and statistical data. In a third step, it is shown how extent and origin of international agenda setting processes can be assessed methodologically, using the data described before. Finally, shortcuts of such a mixed-method procedure are sketched. The paper is based on an example of education policy but transfers to other policy fields are easily possible.

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

This paper deals with the application of verbal data, as texts and documents, for comparative international analysis. I illustrate how the combination of different data sources can be used to build up a major dataset for research on international policy change. Such a dataset is needed for researchers interested in comparing a large number of countries, including those outside the OECD-world.

While research in political science often uses statistics provided by international organizations (IOs), e.g. OECD indicators, other comparative data for large-N analyses seems to be rare. However, IOs often provide additional information on member countries and in this paper I present an analysis based on so-called ‘Policy Reports’. Such are usually submitted to IOs in the context of major conferences and they represent the status of worldwide policy development in the area of interest. An obvious advantage of such material is, therefore, the wide coverage of countries beyond the OECD-world. Often, reports make available information on minor, rather under-researched states and their current political structures and priorities. However, despite them being easy to obtain, they are not widely used for systematic assessment of political change. This might be caused by the reluctance by which quantitative researchers approach verbal material, by assumed non-comparability across cases, or just by the working load that verbal data is likely to cause when being processed to quantitative figures.

This paper intends to show how far such assumptions can hold true: As I try to show, the usage of such data does not only help answering previously non-treatable research questions but, as long as some pitfalls are avoided, the data can also be handled in a time-saving manner. Research questions that can be dealt with in this context could, for example, focus on whether countries converge towards a certain type of statehood or particular policies, how far developed and developing countries apply common political strategies, or if a common ‘world culture’ can be assessed in a specific area (see e.g. Holzinger et al. 2007 or Meyer et al. 1997).[2]

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[1] An earlier version of this article is published in German in Behnke et al. 2007 (forthcoming). I thank Nathalie Behnke for her helpful comments on that version, as well as Eric Seils and an anonymous reviewer who provided additional comments that further shaped this paper. Moreover, I greatly appreciate the editorial assistance provided by Maren Sennhenn. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.

[2] Thereby, the differentiation between policy agendas, policy outputs, and policy outcome helps estimating the specific extent of intended policy change: Research results that focus on

The reports that are at the core of this paper are so-called ‘process-produced data’ (Müller 1977): Their information has been gathered in the course of internal organizational communication, not primarily for scientific inquiry. Accordingly, the material has obvious limits for some research purposes: In this paper, I present an analysis of political ideas and programs – a question linked to agenda-setting and policy-outputs. Political agendas are of interest e.g. in the context of research on policy convergence, thus whether or not parties, states or regions become increasingly similar or different in their policies, or which political trends diffuse at a given time.[3] The reports are particularly useful for such analysis because they provide an overview on political aims, programs, and laws. However, an analysis of policy outcomes based on the reports would be difficult to realize: Statistical data in the reports are most often attached for illustrative purposes only and not comparable to other reports’ statistical content. Moreover, verbal descriptions of policy outputs in these reports are mostly focused on case studies, their selection can be assumed to have a strong positive bias. I do not focus on such case studies, but elaborate on large-N studies of political programs, based on a ‘quantitative logic’ in social science. A central assumption in such is that the number of observations should be as high as possible to gain valid general conclusions (see King/Keohane/Verba 1994). Using policy reports as data source is most appropriate for those who are interested in a high number of observations without inquiring minor details of specific cases; and data collection through reports only requires limited time and financial resources.

To elaborate on the different methodological elements for analyzing policy reports, I proceed as follows: In the first part, I provide an overview on available data, emphasizing on data suitable for the analysis of political agendas and programs. I focus on the data’s origin, including a survey on where adequate material can be found. Following on from that, I will present three different analytical steps: First, I use policy reports to assess the spread of a political idea; and second, I analyze them with regard to corresponding laws and programs. In a third step, a combination of data is used for identify-

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policy outcomes are likely to be influenced by a variety of additional variables, whereas policy agendas and policy outputs are more closely attached to the core of the policy-making process. They are thus more directly linked to corresponding political priorities than are policy outcomes.

[3] Using policy-outcomes for research questions on policy convergence can be inadequate because of the various interfering variables in the process from decision-making to policy implementation. The outcome, thus, might not necessarily be identical with the agenda’s emphasis. On the reverse, researching agendas thus also does not mean being able to say something about the actual implementation of the policies under investigation.

ing causes of the observed pattern. The inquiry is exclusively based on IO data that is analyzed by methods as content analysis or logistic regression. A third part will list pitfalls linked to the data as well as possible solutions.

The paper relies on a study in the field of *education policy*. The methods described, however, can be generalized across different policy fields if comparable data exists. Sound knowledge on IO activities in the specific policy field is therefore an essential part of the methodology and each inquiry should start with research on UN, EU, OECD or other IO activities. Finding or not finding comparable data could lead to first modifications in the specific research design or the methods applied.

2. DATA COLLECTION BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

IOs regularly collect several kinds of member states' data for example with the aim to publish statistical reports, to gather information in the context of conferences or due to other policy-related activities. From 1963 to 1999, the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO) published a comprehensive statistical yearbook that mainly collected input-data[4] of national education systems (see e.g. UNESCO 1999). The different yearbooks have been highly suitable for longitudinal comparative analysis, but due to long-running collection procedures, the data were often outdated at time of publication. Moreover, these statistics could not provide any comparison of an education system's input and output. Therefore, when UNESCO established its Institute for Statistics in 1999, one of its aims was the development of different and more current data (UNESCO 2006:4). Since 2003, the institute publishes the 'Global Education Digest' which features a different educational issue each year but also encompasses serial indicators.[5] The current statistics enable comparative analysis of countries, but since data is different to the former statistical yearbook, comparison to data from 1999 or earlier is difficult. Generally, due to their wide and long-term coverage, UNESCO statistics are a source for other providers of education statistics, as the Global Education Database of USAID, the World Bank or the 'Education for All' Initiative, too.[6]

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[4] Input-data relates to investments in the education systems, as the number of teachers, the number of students etc. Output-data relate to the result, as how many students gain a formal qualification or a competency. The combination of both input- and output-data generates a concrete picture of a national education system's effectiveness, i.e. how much money is spend on a pupil who leaves secondary school.

[5] The data is available online, as well as the whole digest, see http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev_en.php? ID=6513_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC, last access August, 15, 2006.

[6] For the Global Education Database see http://qesdb.cdie.org/ged/index.html, last access August 19, 2006; for information on World Bank see http://go.worldbank.org/85XM5TBQA0,

Besides statistics, UNESCO additionally has collected and published verbal data on countries' education systems, starting with the 1960s and 1970s series 'World Survey on Education' (e.g. UNESCO 1971). This series has been a collection of country reports that cover almost all of the world's territories. They are structured in a similar way and to some extent allow comparison.[7] In the 1990s, this idea of non-statistical country data has been taken up again by the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE). Around every four years, the Geneva-based IBE convenes the 'International Conference of Education'. For its preparation, countries are requested to submit policy reports. These reports – in the following called IBE policy reports – focus on partly predetermined policy questions and they describe the current education system and governmental policies. For some years, many of these reports have been available as PDF-documents in English language.[8] Moreover, the IBE established a database, the 'World Data on Education', that is based on the reports information but presents them in a comparable structure.[9] Such data is particularly valuable for analyzing political agendas, since it contains programs, reforms, and structures in national education policy.

Other IOs with universal membership structure provide verbal, process-produced data, too, e.g. the *International Labor Organization* (ILO). In the context of the new 'Human Resource Development Recommendation', the ILO has established a database that contains information on the introduction of so-called national qualification frameworks, a new trend in education policy.[10] The database presents countries that have in-

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last access May 19, 2007; for 'Education for All Initiative' see http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49630&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC &URL _SECTION=201.html last access May 19, 2007.

7 The guiding principle has been provision of information, so some reports are not formulated by the countries or territories, but by the UNESCO secretariat, which is different to today's reports.

8 The reports can be found at http://www.ibe.unesco.org/resourcebank/prevNatRep.htm (1996); http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/46english/46natrape.htm (2001); and http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE47/English/Natreps/Nrep_main.htm (2004), last access on May 1, 2006.

9 See http://www.ibe.unesco.org/countries/WDE/WorldDataE.htm, last access August 25, 2006. The disadvantage of this data bank is that it encompasses different texts of different age. Even in its newer version, it might contain older texts, since some countries submit reports only sporadically and those remain in the data bank over the years. This source is therefore suitable for a survey from 1996 to today, but not for assessing a countries education policy at a specific time.

10 See http://www.logos-net.net/ilo/nqf/index.htm, last access September 20, 2005.

troduced such frameworks, the way they did it as well as some evaluative remarks. The current political development to identify and learn on ‚best practices' likely results in even more data of this kind, since IOs have become focal points for collecting and distributing such practices.

Being a further IO active in education policy, the *World Bank* also provides statistical data, partly in cooperation with other organizations, as in the case of the ‚Global Country Data' that is based on UNESCO sources.[11] Besides such specific information on education policy, the bank is known for providing a large variety of economic and social statistics, as longitudinal data across countries and regions. With its project dossiers, the bank also publishes verbal data on countries (World Bank 2002; World Bank 2004); such are, however, neither standardized nor comparable so that comparative studies could rely on them only to a small extent.[12]

Globally operating IOs collect worldwide data but other organizations are important providers of data, too. The *OECD* publishes verbal data on education systems, mainly ‘reviews' which differ from the IBE policy reports: They either compare a specific issue of education policy across several countries, or they focus on one country and evaluate several dimensions of its education system. In that way, the reviews provide a current and elaborated insight into the country, but they cannot provide a broader, comparative picture across many countries. Statistical data is published as the OECD indicators ‘Education at a Glance' or as PISA results (e.g. OECD 2004a). The organization has started cooperation with the UNESCO in 1997 for compiling the ‘World Education Indicators'.[13] Focusing on education outputs, OECD statistics concentrate on results of education policy. Besides, the organization provides many forms of comparable statistics. However, analyses based on OECD data are usually constrained by the extremely limited set of countries which are biased towards industrialized countries. OECD data is

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[11] See http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/0,, contentMDK:20573961~ menu PK:282404~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK: 282386,00.html, last access August 19, 2006.

[12] A further source is the report published by the initiative ‚Education for All', supported by UNESCO and World Bank. Since 2002 these reports are published annually, each featuring a special subject matter related to education. Their statistical content encompasses many indicators that allow synchronic or diachronic comparison of countries worldwide (vgl. EFA/UNESCO 2004).

[13] See the Online Education Database: http://www1.oecd.org/scripts/cde/members/linkpage.html, last access August 19, 2006, see also http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?URL_ID=5263&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201, last access August 25, 2006.

therefore most often not feasible for general conclusions across different types of countries, or for comparing developed and developing countries.

The same holds true for data provided by the *European Union*. EuroStat publishes data concerning several policy fields, among them indicators on education. Besides, the database ‘Eurydice’ contains information on national education policy, as both statistical data and as country reports that are rather similar to those of the UNESCO.[14] Despite the comparability of such data, the number of observations remains restricted.

Summarizing the different sources, it can be said that, despite some restrictions, data on education policy is available: a large number of IOs are active in this issue area and collect data on national activities.[15] In particular the verbal data is suitable for analysis of education policy agendas and programs, especially when being combined with additional information. The following part presents such procedure, relying on a study that assessed worldwide diffusion of the education policy idea ‘lifelong learning’[16]. I show how a research question linked to agenda setting can be examined by a combination of the sources described above.

3. CASE STUDY: THE WORLD-WIDE DIFFUSION OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Researching policy agendas initially starts with a basic question concerning operationalization: What is actually part of the agenda and what is not? Is the agenda best represented in policy-outputs only, as national laws, or are programmatic discussions, as declarations of intention also included? While laws are easier to define and count, the worldwide diversity of political decision-making might not be represented adequately in an inquiry that focuses on laws only. Moreover, very current international debates might not yet been mirrored in national legislation, while there is nonetheless vivid political

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[14] See http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/Overview/OverviewByTopic, last access July 12, 2007.

[15] However, the high number of sources can distort the extent to which statistical data is available: As the case of ‚Education for All’ shows, IOs cooperate in data collection or transfer data from one to another. The last years have also revealed that there is competition among the organizations who is actually delivering the most useful data: Since UNESCO has not delivered output data for a long time, although some members have frequently demanded such, other IOs as the OECD have begun with collecting it, including an explicitly comparative aim (Martens 2005). Through the collection and dissemination of such data, the OECD has received increased reputation in the field of education, while UNESCO influence has decreased (vgl. Cusso/D’Amico 2005).

[16] The following case is based on Jakobi (2006). For reasons of readability, the term ‚lifelong learning’ is written without quotation marks. Nonetheless, the text only refers to the policy of lifelong learning, not to concrete, individual learning processes.

discussion. To reflect these differences, the analysis presented here consists of three steps and combines different methods and data sources: First, the spread of the *idea* of lifelong learning is assessed across countries. Second, it is inquired where *policies* related to that idea, as laws, policy papers or programs, can be found. Finally, *causes* of lifelong learning diffusion are examined.

Step 1: Analysis of the political idea. This analysis is conducted with a standardized content analysis. It is counted whether or not an education policy report contains a reference to the idea of lifelong learning, operationalized by the terms ‘lifelong learning’ or ‘lifelong education’ in different spellings.[17] The result is a binary coded table that lists whether or not a specific report refers to the idea. The binary coding is chosen since the length of reports varies widely: Developed countries often hand in long reports while developing countries do not have such capacities. A metric scale would thus cause a large bias towards developed countries.[18]

To show the development of this idea over time, a time series is needed, which is difficult since the number of reports is not constant over the years, but grows. Some countries, however, submitted one report only, while other submitted three. In order to maximize the number of observations, the reports are cumulated, but the different points of time are assessed, too. Table 1 illustrates the results: The last column presents the analysis of the period 1996 to 2004. In total, 99 countries could be analyzed, and 78 have referred at least once to lifelong learning. It is important to note, however, that countries who refer to the idea only once, for reasons that they did only submit one report or that the other reports do not mention lifelong learning, are all coded with ‘1’, the same as countries that mention the idea in each of their three reports. Methodologically, this is suitable for an analysis of lifelong learning’s spread in the period given, but it

[17] The exact terms are: ‘lifelong learning’, ‘lifelong education’, ‘life-long and continuous education’, ‘learning is a continuous and lifelong process’, ‘long-life learning’, ‘learning throughout life’, ‘education throughout life’, ‘lifelong training’, ‘lifelong learners’, ‘education in a lifelong perspective’, in multiple spellings, as capital or minor letters or ‘life-long’ and ‘life long’.

[18] Principally, it would be possible to relate the overall length of a report to the number of times it mentions lifelong learning, as the Manifesto Research Project does it with sentences related to the length of party manifestos (Budge et al. 2001). It would, however, be extremely resource-consuming, and a main advantage of the reports would be given away. If resources for time-consuming practices are available, it could also be thought of alternatives to the reports like the collection of data through expert questionnaires or reports in various countries.

becomes problematic when exact timing or a decline should also be included in the analysis.

Table 1: Diffusion of the idea of lifelong learning

	1996	**2001**	**2004**
Percentage of countries referring to lifelong learning			
- in the respective year	62.8	70.6	72.0
- accumulated (from 1996)	62.8	71.8	78.8
Number of countries referring to lifelong learning			
- in the respective year	27	36	59
- accumulated (from 1996)	27	51	78
Number of countries analyzed			
- in the respective year	43	51	82
- accumulated (from 1996)	43	71	99

Source: own account based on Jakobi (2006)

The aim to maximize the number of observations does, however, not imply that all available reports are necessarily being analyzed. In the case described here, only reports in English language and only those that can be scanned with text software – here: Acrobat Reader – are selected. This selection has methodological as well as pragmatic reasons: In principle, also reports in other languages or those that cannot be scanned could be evaluated, but this might mean an enormous additional workload without an obvious added-value. Evaluating Spanish and French reports would increase the number of observations, but finding a common terminology for the key words in all three languages is a difficult task, since the international scholarly discussion is mainly held in English, while French or Spanish ‘sub-discussions’ with their terminology are less known. Weaknesses in language might heavily influence coding procedure, which must be based on comparable definitions across all languages: The different terms should not vary in broadness and accuracy. In practice, this is difficult to achieve and results are likely to be less accurate, although the workload has multiplied. [19] The workload is also

[19] Obviously, this argument is related to the specific qualifications and the context of the researcher. If the researcher knows the scholarly debates in the other languages, it is of course possible to conduct the analysis across all three languages. In fact, however, there need to be at least some ideas whether the discussion actually also takes place in other languages, so that conclusions drawn from reports in one language can also be generalized across different linguistic (and cultural) communities. In the case of lifelong learning, references to the idea can be found in French- and Spanish-speaking countries (Ministère de l'èducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche 2004:6,22,48; Argentinean Education Minis-

an argument for only evaluating reports that can be scanned: Analysis through software is much faster and much easier to reproduce. Even if a re-analysis is seldom made, it should principally be possible; and electronic processing supports such.

Step 2: Analysis of education policy reforms. To assess this second level of agenda setting, a non-standardized text analysis with pre-defined categories is conducted. In the case of lifelong learning, reforms can be defined as the aim to expand educational phases over the life course. Education is thus not restricted to schooling, but enlarged towards early childhood and adulthood. Accordingly, categories derived encompass pre-primary education, adult education and higher education.[20] Possible reforms and programs in these areas are defined and each country report is evaluated along this analytical grid (see table 2). Reforms in the given area are marked, and coded with ‘1’.

Since this procedure is both non-standardized as well as time-consuming, it should be documented accurately. This means that the source is attached to each code ‘1’, so that, in principle, a more in-depth analysis could rely on these references. The result of such procedure is a large table that encompasses information on countries reforms.

Table 2: Categories for Assessing Lifelong Learning Reforms

Sector of State Intervention	
Pre-primary Education	A1: Compulsory pre-Primary Education
	A2: Pre-Primary Curriculum
	A3: Other (Pre-Primary)
Adult Education	B1: National Qualification Framework
	B2: Laws, Regulations etc. concerning increased adult education (incl. new institutions)
	B3: Increased Financing of Adult Education
	B4: Other (Adult)
Higher Education	C1: Laws, Regulations etc. concerning increased Higher Education (incl. new institutions)
	C2: Increased Financing of Higher Education
	C3: Other (Higher Education)

Source: Jakobi (2006:36)

Principally, all data listed above could be combined for gaining a description of reforms worldwide: UNESCO reports might be as helpful as OECD sources, or ILO and EU

try 2004:27) so that such restrictions are not necessary and findings can be generalized across these countries, without exploring their case systematically.

[20] This description is shortened since theoretical questions are not at the centre of this paper, although being essential for concrete research. The complete theoretical justification for these categories can be found in Jakobi (2006:32-33); including the independent variables mentioned below.

data. However, if such descriptive data on reforms are thought as a basis for further inquiry, as in the case to find out whether more countries mention the idea of lifelong learning than actually start reforms, a systematic survey of the reforms is needed. For such purpose, data on reforms that have been collected systematically should be isolated from those that have not, which can easily be done for example by shading grey one group. That way, both types of information can be differentiated at a glance, and only the highlighted group constitutes the basis for the following analysis, although that means that some available information cannot be used (see illustration 2). In the case of lifelong learning, only UNESCO and ILO data was adequately systematic, since both IOs do not have a bias towards a specific region or the economic structure of the countries.[21]

It is important to note that the combination of verbal data requires as much carefulness and accuracy as the combination of statistical data, and knowledge on the organization that provides this process-produced data is mandatory. To give an obvious example: Only the one who knows that the OECD is mainly attached to industrialized countries can sufficiently evaluate why a sample that includes OECD data emphasizes reforms of those countries and is thus biased.

Step 3: Analysis of Causes. The result of the methodological procedure so far is information on how many countries refer to lifelong learning in the context of their education policy and how many countries have started corresponding reforms. For the last step, inquiring causes of lifelong learning diffusion, the data set is enlarged to include additional variables. Theoretically, international or national causes could play a major role in diffusing the idea and reforms. Accordingly, one set of variables on international players as IOs is included and another one on national conditions. The former are operationalized by membership, participation in education policy programs of the IOs or similar activities.[22] The latter group is operationalized by the economic situation in a country (as GNI per capita) or by the structure of the national knowledge-economy

[21] ILO data exactly represented one of the categories (B1) and was thus added to the evaluation of the UNESCO reports. It is a source that covers the same spectrum as the UNESCO and can therefore be combined.

[22] The increasing activities of IOs in policy development have in fact methodological consequences in coding such variables: While contact to IOs had often been restricted or mainly focused on member countries, organizations as the OECD today know ‚partner countries' in education policy or just expand their activities far beyond their members. Therefore, a more differentiated coding is necessary.

(percentage of tertiary sector of GDP). Moreover, a country could be influenced by its neighbors or contact to NGOs might a main cause for diffusion.[23]

The different organizations listed above provide data on any of these variables: Information on membership and participation in programs is easily accessible through the website of any organization, the World Bank provides data on the economic situation of the countries, the influence of neighborhood can be assessed by classifying regions, and UNESCO reports also contain verbal information on NGO activity in the countries. In the case of lifelong learning, the combination of all these data constitutes a comprehensive dataset on 99 countries which can be analyzed quantitatively, by logistic regression analysis.[24] Table 3 lists the combination of different sources in the set.

The dataset thus enables the researcher to draw statistical conclusions from verbal data. In the example given here, results e.g. show that the OECD plays a main role in spreading the concept of lifelong learning, but some effects of independent variables as NGOs, resources or economic structure could also be assessed (see Jakobi 2006). Such results show that verbal data does not restrict the researcher to qualitative methods.

Table 3: Variables and Sources in the Data Set

Variable	**Source**
Idea of lifelong learning	UNESCO reports
Lifelong Learning Reforms	UNESCO reports, ILO database
IO Contact	Lists of member states and program participants
NGO Activity	UNESCO reports
Region	UNESCO Classification
Economic situation	World Bank Statistics

Source: Jakobi 2007, modified

4. PITFALLS

It is obvious however, that such a combination of data and methods has shortcomings and restrictions, too. First and foremost, the selection of sources requires ongoing consciousness concerning possible biases in the material and its consequences. In the study

[23] These variables have been constructed with a view on a specific case and have been derived from a particular theoretical background. Their presentation here has a purely descriptive purpose, to show how the method principally can be applied. This list of variables is neither exclusive nor suggestive; instead, other researchers with other backgrounds may find it much more useful to test other variables.

[24] Logistic regression analysis is made due to the binary coded dependent variable. Linear regression would be possible if verbal data is coded in a way that results in a metric variable (see Backhaus et al. 2003, Andreß/Haagenaars/Kühnel 1997).

presented above, the selection of English reports had the consequence that the data set contains less information on Latin America, since most countries there are Spanish-speaking. Although not having been the case here, this could in principle result in conclusions that cannot be drawn cross-culturally.[25]

Moreover, a combination of OECD and UNESCO data is difficult, since both usually differ in their scope and accuracy. Furthermore, working with different sources and sorts of data, and transferring verbal to statistical data is not only a process full of details, but it is also difficult to reproduce. Therefore, an accurate documentation of each step is needed. Finally, it is necessary to think on whether the use of specific verbal data or the process of its creation does not in fact determine certain results. This is in particular risky in the case of process-produced data if the context of the information given is unfamiliar to the researcher. For example, reports could not have been evaluated if they would have contained information on lifelong learning that the IO has explicitly asked for. Two main reasons exist for such exclusion: Obviously, explicit questions concerning lifelong learning would cause a major problem concerning socially wishful behavior, which means that countries could mention or label activities linked to ‘lifelong learning’ only because they would like to show compliance or ‘good behavior’. Such influence on data production always exists, also concerning statistical data, but direct questions are very likely to result in a systematically distorted response behavior.

So, only at first sight, such material based on explicit reporting duties looks particularly suitable for analysis, but in fact, such reports would be non-comparable to reports in the years when the IO did not ask such questions. A time series would thus not be possible with such reports and it would also not be useful to run a standardized content analysis that assesses whether or not a country mentions lifelong learning: Variance would be surprising and the IOs explicit question would cause inaccurate results for that year. Conversely, the search for key words or categories might be impossible if the IO has restricted the country’s reporting – e.g. by a request not to mention any activity linked to higher education – or if the research question is focusing on an area that the IO does not deal with: ILO data, for example, will unlikely elaborate on pre-primary education if it is not linked to the working life, as well as OECD is likely to mention all educational reforms in a context of economic development. Using process-produced data from IOs thus requires sound knowledge on the actual process.

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[25] References to lifelong learning, references to the idea can also be found in countries that do not have a primarily Anglo-Saxon background, as France or Argentina (Ministère de l'èducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche 2004:6,22,48; Argentinean Education Ministry 2004:27) . Therefore, such restrictions are not necessary and findings can be generalized across these countries; without exploring their case systematically.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has illustrated the combination of IO data in a mixed-method design: The essential starting point for such analysis is sound knowledge on availability of data and on possible methods. In such case, verbal data can be analyzed quantitatively, as well as it can be combined with other material. Using material as policy reports for comparative quantitative analysis requires investment in time, but bears the potential to increase the number of observations significantly. The resulting data set contains information on many parts of the world and goes far beyond available material.

If the pitfalls linked to the process are beard in mind, IOs thus provide rich and comprehensive material that has rarely been used to date and it could enlarge the spectrum of empirical research questions. While the policy reports presented in this paper can mainly be applied in the context of research on political programs, as agenda setting, this does not indicate that other data is not available. Considering such material is suitable for all researchers who are interested in large-N comparative analysis, in particular with the aim to compare different regions and types of countries.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Anja P. Jakobi, Dr., is Senior Researcher at the Collaborative Research Center “Transformations of the State”, University of Bremen. Her research interests are particularly international organizations and international politics, crime policies, education policy as well as social policy.

Telephone:	+49 421 218 - 87 28
Fax:	+49 421 218 - 87 21
E-Mail:	anja.jakobi@sfb597.uni-bremen.de
Address:	University of Bremen, Collaborative Research Center „Transformations of the State“, Linzer Strasse 9a, D 28359 Bremen