

## **COMMENT – The OIF: What If We All Spoke French?**

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The International Organization of La Francophonie (*L'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* or IOF) represents several so-called “French-speaking” or francophone<sup>1</sup> nations and those with affiliations to French culture. Headquartered in Paris, the organization was founded in 1970 shortly after the liberation of numerous French colonies (Munro, n.d.). The present-day foundation comprises 88 member and observer states (*L'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*, n.d.). Despite benevolent claims, the OIF has long contributed to the preservation of colonial influence under the guise of unity.

Among the stated objectives of the OIF is the unification of French-speaking peoples and cultures, the encouragement of peace, and to provide access to a variety of content in French. While the distribution of content in French may allow one to be better versed in international events and issues, there is a strong favoritism for content that comes from France – neglecting the 28 separate French-speaking countries. Additional favoritism takes shape linguistically: standard French is the only form widely recognized and used by the OIF. Alternative French dialects have consistently been omitted from the organization’s “universal” content.

The OIF promotes an overwhelming influence from France and Canada onto other countries. Developing francophone regions are primarily subjected to this political and social influence, perpetuating an imbalance of power between countries. France and Canada are provided with primary control over the actions of this organization, as the vast majority of funding for the OIF comes from these two countries (Neathery-Castro & Rousseau, 2005). Favoritism for wealthy countries is evident

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<sup>1</sup> The term “francophone” refers to those who speak any variety of the French language. This term is not reserved for native speakers, but also applies to those of all regions who have learned French as a secondary language (Assimil, 2020).

through the organization's fixation on French and Canadian content and dialects. Regions unable to provide the same funding have very little representation, and virtually no power over the financial policies and practices of the OIF. Are those with less resources less deserving of this authority?

A rather concerning portion of the organization's members are former French colonies. Among these former colonies is Vietnam, where the cultural influence of France has been maintained through the organization's incessant promotion of language and media. However, fewer than one percent of the Vietnamese population speaks French fluently – most of whom are old enough to have lived under the colonial rule of France (L., 2014). The inclusion of regions who seldom speak French reveals the possible desire of France to maintain power and influence over its former colonies.

Algeria has recognized the organization's neo-colonialist incentives, referring to it as a "Trojan horse for the pursuit of the narrower interests of France" (Benrabah, 2013). Through a history of forced conformity, French grew to be a prominent language in Algeria. Despite this prominence, the country has refused for decades to become an official member of the OIF. Encouragement from the organization to adopt what is considered the *proper* French dialect and culture – especially in regions that hardly use the language – is quite reminiscent of France's colonialist history. The establishment of territorial rule is founded upon assimilation, as well as the disregard of human rights and individuality; this has been perpetuated by the OIF through its narrow and hierarchical content.

The OIF claims to be a space of diversity, however neo-colonialist practices are deeply embedded within the organization. The values of wealthy and primarily white regions dominate the OIF and have been forced upon members for decades. This organization promotes a false image of what it means to be a *francophonie*, and actively perpetuates this harmful hierarchy. Through a representation of all French dialects and access to news from a variety of regions, the OIF can achieve what it claims to be: a unification of all French-speaking regions.

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