Organizational learning in United Nations’ peacekeeping exit strategies

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Abstract
This article illustrates how organizational learning can explain the shift in United Nations’ peacekeeping exit strategies from the election-based approach of the 1990s to peacebuilding. Conceptualizing learning as an ideal-type, three-step process, of knowledge acquisition, interpretation and institutionalization, the analysis reveals the impact of new knowledge on institutional change. It demonstrates how knowledge acquisition became systematized within the United Nations’ Secretariat especially after 2000, with the active promotion of boundary-spanning activities. The analysis then shows how a shared understanding of the role of peacebuilding for exit strategies was developed by the organization’s bureaucracy and intergovernmental bodies in the interpretation step. Finally, it highlights how the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission institutionalized the transition to peacebuilding as the new exit strategy and how new learning capacities were created. By conceiving the interaction between international organizations and their external environment as a dynamic relationship, the analysis confirms the potential of organizational learning theories for explaining institutional change in international relations.

Keywords
exit strategies, international organizations, organizational learning, peacebuilding, United Nations peacekeeping

Introduction
Although designed to solve common global problems, international organizations (IOs) have nevertheless developed practices which Barnett and Finnemore (1999) identified as ‘pathological’; the specific organizational characteristics of IOs make them prone to dysfunctional and hypocritical behaviour that contradicts their original mission. The case of peacekeeping exit strategies was identified as such a pathology (see Barnett and
Finnemore, 1999: 720; Hirschmann, 2012; Lipson, 2007). Since the debacle in Somalia in 1992, United Nations (UN) peace operations after the Cold War have relied on an election-based exit strategy which defined the conduct of elections as the criterion for withdrawing an operation (Caplan, 2005: 212; Chesterman, 2004: 205; Durch et al., 2003: 32). Over time, this strategy became an end in itself, as the organization conducted elections under circumstances that even rendered them counterproductive to the original goal of establishing peace.

However, pathologies do not have to persist for ever. In the case of exit strategies, the UN’s approach to ending peace operations changed after leaving behind a mixed record of success in Namibia and tragic failures in Rwanda and Angola. Transition towards peacebuilding has become the new strategy for ending peacekeeping missions, which required an active long-term involvement in peace processes and a more integrated modus operandi on the part of the organization’s security and development actors. Various aspects of peacebuilding, which had not been part of the original mandate of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), have now been integrated into the UN’s peacekeeping structure (Barnett et al., 2007: 42). The recent strategy developed jointly by the DPKO and the Department of Field Support (DFS) identifies ‘peacekeepers as early peacebuilders’. This indicates a substantial and long-term institutional change through which peacekeeping and peacebuilding have become closely connected (see Cousens, 2001).

This article explores the processes through which this change in exit strategies can be explained. It uses the mechanism of organizational learning to illustrate its explanatory potential in the context of institutional the change. Combining the frameworks of Haas (1990) and Huber (1991), organizational learning is conceptualized as a process of knowledge acquisition, interpretation and institutionalization. While conceiving the interaction between international organizations and their external environment as a dynamic relationship, the analysis provides valuable insights on the role of knowledge for the adoption of peacebuilding as the new criterion for exit strategies.

By applying organizational learning to the change in peacekeeping exit strategies, this study makes several important contributions. It explores the influence of knowledge on the dynamics of organizational decision-making even in cases of hard-core security issues, where learning was expected to have less impact (Haas, 1992: 79). Furthermore, it illustrates how organizational learning works as a mechanism to address pathological behaviour. The process reveals how the different parts of an organization reacted to organized hypocrisy and, by incorporating new knowledge, changed peacekeeping exit strategies from elections to peacebuilding. By situating the emergence of peacebuilding in the context of exit strategies, the analysis complements existing studies on the origins and successes of the concept as such (e.g. Barnett et al., 2007, Paris, 2004; Stedman, 2002).

The following section establishes the theoretical framework of organizational learning as a three-step process of knowledge acquisition, interpretation and institutionalization. This framework is then applied to the case of peacekeeping exit strategies in order to explore how organizational learning can help explain institutional change. The conclusion gives an account of possible alternative explanatory mechanisms, summarizes the main findings and identifies avenues for future research.
Organizational learning as a causal mechanism for explaining institutional change

Causal mechanisms have become a helpful analytical tool for case study research (George and Bennett, 2005). The focus lies in ‘identifying the processes through which [a social phenomenon] is generated’ (Mayntz, 2004: 238). However, only recently have efforts been undertaken to develop causal mechanisms that explain how institutional change in international organizations actually takes place (e.g. Hofmann, 2008; Park, 2005). Different mechanisms established by the research on diffusion, namely coercion, competition, emulation and learning, represent a helpful starting point (see Börzel and Risse, 2007; Simmons et al., 2006). Although developed through research which focused on the effect of norms on the state level, these mechanisms nevertheless constitute an important theoretical framework for explaining change within an international organization (Heupel and Zürn, 2010). The mechanisms are not meant to be mutually exclusive but can operate simultaneously or sequentially. In the context of this study, however, the focus is on organizational learning in order to explore its explanatory potential for analysing institutional change. Contrary to the three other mechanisms, learning emphasizes the pivotal role of knowledge processing and interpretation. As information control and knowledge construction have been identified as the central elements contributing to the power and authority of IOs as independent bureaucracies, learning seems the most promising mechanism to be explored (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 29). Moreover, it allows us to benefit from the conceptual insights of organization theories (e.g. Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2006a; March and Olsen, 1975).

Surprisingly few scholars of International Relations have been interested in applying organizational learning to their field so far (Adebahr, 2009: 91). Based on the theoretical foundations of Haas (1990), Huber (1991) and Argyris and Schön (1978), some case studies were conducted to analyse learning in various organizations (e.g. Benner et al., 2011; Böhling, 2007; Hofmann, 2008; Liese, 2003; Siebenhüner, 2008). Despite these empirical studies, however, a coherent theory of organizational learning in IR has not yet been developed. Moreover, the literature still lacks profound theoretical and empirical analyses of learning processes on the organization level with regard to the UN as well as to other international organizations. The concept of learning has played an ever greater role when evaluating UN peace operations; however, most existing studies concentrate on the mission level or restrict their time frame to the period after a ‘learning infrastructure’ had been established within the UN bureaucracy (see, for example, Benner et al., 2011; Chesterman, 2004; Diehl, 2008; Durch, 2006; Howard, 2008). It is the purpose of this article to analyse organizational learning on the strategic and decision-making levels and thereby to identify learning processes within the UN headquarters structure after the Cold War. Revealing the different stages of learning will enhance our understanding of the functioning of IOs and their internal dynamics of institutional change. This supports the notion of a distinct actorness of IOs by opening up the ‘black box’ and analysing the different parts of IOs (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999).

Organizational learning in this study is conceptualized as a three-step process of collective knowledge acquisition, knowledge interpretation and knowledge institutionalization (see also Benner et al., 2011; Huber, 1991). In contrast to the more
technical trial-and-error process of adaptation or rational Bayesian updating, learning is characterized by reflection and organizational inquiries into a problem and existing practices, which leads to the reformulation of organizational rules and belief systems (Argyris and Schön, 1978: 22). While this conceptualization avoids normative judgments regarding the outcome of learning, it also emphasizes the collective character of organizational learning in contrast to individual learning and combines the conceptions of Haas (1990) and Huber (1991). Organizational learning thus implies the transformation of available knowledge about problems and possible solutions into a shared collective understanding which becomes integrated in organizational memory. Knowledge in a learning process is more than fact-based or technical information; it contains pre-structured interpretations of cause–effect relationships and complex problem solutions (Haas and Haas, 1995).

In the process of knowledge acquisition, the organization is ‘taking apart the problem’ (Haas, 1990: 24). This prompts the organization to engage in ‘boundary-spanning activities’ with its external environment in order to systematically address a specific problem (Böhling, 2007). Members at the ‘boundaries’ of the organization who are well connected to the external environment search for new knowledge and problem solutions that were developed by external experts or at the remote field level (Benner et al., 2011: ch. 3). They filter the input according to its relevance from the organization’s perspective and channel the acquired knowledge internally. The boundary-spanning activities of an organization depend on the organization’s problem awareness and on the available ‘consensual knowledge’ developed by epistemic communities, that is, national or transnational ‘networks of professionals with a recognized expertise in a specific issue-area’ (Haas, 1992: 4, 14). Boundary-spanning activities are essential for a learning process, as they define the interaction between an organization and its environment and constitute the organization’s filters for mediating new knowledge (Aldrich, 1979: 110).

In the second step of knowledge interpretation, new knowledge is linked to an issue by establishing ‘new causal chains’ (Haas, 1990: 28). This implies the revaluation of previous strategies with regard to the newly acquired knowledge. In the course of interpreting the available knowledge, the organization develops new ‘shared meanings’ and thus replaces what has previously been regarded as appropriate (Haas, 1990: 40). This requires an internal debate, in which actors within the organization explicitly use new knowledge to enhance the plausibility of their arguments while referring to existing common norms and practices (Benner et al., 2011; Simmons et al., 2008: 28, 30). Indicators include references to the organization’s mandate, the common good, the needs of the organization as a whole, the need for consensus as well as arguments based on legal rules and procedures (Riddervold, 2011). In this reflective process, new knowledge is examined to determine whether, from the organization’s point of view, it is more appropriate for dealing with the problem than existing understandings.

Knowledge institutionalization ensures that the new knowledge becomes part of the organization’s rules and practices in order to insulate it from changes through individual preferences or personnel turnover (March and Olsen, 2005: 4). This occurs through the development of ‘new organs, subunits, or administrative practices’ designed to incorporate new knowledge (Haas, 1990: 85). The new knowledge is anchored in organizational memory and thus socializes members and staff in daily policy and decision-making
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This requires other members of the organization, especially those involved in decision-making and planning, to become ‘inducted’ by the new consensual knowledge (Risse and Sikkink, 1999: 11). It can also include an increase in the organization’s learning capacities, which has been described as deuto-learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978). This implies new forms of institutional memory and formal evaluation procedures that accompany the decision-making and implementation processes (Benner et al., 2011: ch. 3).

It is important to note that in reality these three steps are not so easy to distinguish because they can overlap or occur simultaneously. For the purpose of analytical clarity, however, the ideal-type distinction is maintained due to its advantage for conceptualizing learning as a process. In the next section, the change in peacekeeping exit strategies is examined by applying the framework of organizational learning.

Organizational learning in peacekeeping exit strategies: Explaining the change from elections to peacebuilding

Knowledge acquisition

Boundary-spanning activities during the 1990s. Throughout the early 1990s, the UN peacekeeping bureaucracy did not actively seek to challenge the existing understanding of exit strategies by acquiring new knowledge. Instead, elections were regarded as a useful means to ensure democratic stabilization and guaranteed a timely withdrawal (Ahmed et al., 2007: 14). The organization’s boundary-spanning activities on the issue of peace operation exits were limited to individual mission evaluations without routinely capturing field experiences or expert knowledge on the role of elections. Despite some early efforts to reach out to the organization’s external environment for mission evaluations, at that time there were neither signs that the overall principle of elections for ending peacekeeping missions was questioned nor that substantial new knowledge on how to achieve peace was acquired. Peacekeeping evaluations mainly focused on drawing lessons from individual operations with regard to technical aspects in order to adapt the range of tasks of future missions (Bellamy and Williams, 2010: 111–119; Rubinstein, 2008: 8). Shaped by a long-standing ‘culture of constant improvisation’, the bureaucratic peacekeeping staff strictly opposed efforts of evaluation or systematized knowledge acquisition (Benner et al., 2011: 30). No significant number of experienced boundary-spanning actors existed that would actively acquire new knowledge at the interface between the organization, its environment and the field. An internal evaluation contributed to the creation of a Lessons Learned Unit within the DPKO in 1995, which was intended to systematically collect knowledge from past field operations. Staff resources for knowledge acquisition, however, remained very limited and rendered the search for new knowledge rather eclectic.

This changed with a new generation of staff with profound field experiences who entered the peacekeeping bureaucracy in the mid-1990s (Benner et al., 2011: 32). Based on their experiences on the ground, they became aware of problems regarding the exit of a mission and advocated a new culture of openness and evaluation. Supported by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, they acted as the first boundary spanners who channelled new knowledge from the field into the peacekeeping bureaucracy and pushed for
investigations. However, the activities of the boundary spanners, trying to channel new knowledge into the organization, were met with strong discontent on great parts of the senior leadership (Benner et al., 2011: 34).

The role of epistemic communities. Even if the organization had actively turned to epistemic communities in order to acquire new knowledge on the role of elections in peace operations, however, it would have had a hard time finding views which challenged the existing electoral approach for exit strategies. During the 1990s, research on the democratic peace paradigm and governance regarded elections as the central element for democratization and post-conflict transition (Chesterman, 2004: ch. 4; Pastor, 1998; Rich and Newman, 2004). Since the end of the 1990s, however, this ‘electoralism’ has increasingly been questioned and criticized (Gowan, 2006: 464; Mansfield and Snyder, 1995). The extension of the traditional security concept redirected the academic debate towards new notions of individual security and advocated ‘human security’ in order to link it to development. This coincided with the evolution of the concept of peacebuilding in research on democracy (see, e.g., Call and Cousens, 2008; Gowan and Johnstone, 2007), and together the two approaches called for a change in the nature and objectives of peace operations. New knowledge made available through research revealed a modified understanding of peace and a broader concept of democracy. Studies comparing field experiences pointed out the long-term requirements for sustainable peace which would encompass diverse efforts in the area of development and stabilization. They emphasized that elections could no longer be taken as a lasting sign of democracy and peaceful conflict resolution. In contrast, stability through institution-building and development became the new category for how sustainable peace and statehood could be achieved.

How exactly was this new knowledge acquired by the UN and how did it lead to the change in exit strategies? Surprisingly for a world organization, the epistemic communities with which the UN closely cooperates are limited in their number and geographical range. Due to the organization’s way of working on a ‘face-to-face basis’, the academic advisors dealing with the issue of peacekeeping come from a small club of about a dozen, mainly Western, research institutes. This fact has to be highlighted, since the composition of the external epistemic communities heavily influences what kind of knowledge is available. In order to initiate a substantial learning process, however, the organization itself has to actively approach the epistemic communities of its outer circle. The following section shows how increased problem awareness within the organization, together with new knowledge provided by epistemic communities, has contributed to a new dynamic in the learning process.

Knowledge acquisition after 2000. The biggest push for active knowledge acquisition from inside the Secretariat was Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s decision to appoint a panel of experts under Lakhdar Brahimi on the ‘Threats and Challenges of Peace Operations in 2000’ (Bellamy and Williams, 2010: 121; Durch et al., 2003). The panel’s report was the first attempt to systematically complement past peacekeeping experiences with academic knowledge on peace operations. Although it did not produce new knowledge, but rather summarized available knowledge and evaluations, the report
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openly challenged the existing consensus on exit strategies within the organization. Through confidential but not secret monthly meetings with members of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping, the panel composed of experts from inside and outside the organization channelled its claim that exit strategies should not be restricted to the conduct of elections any more. It advocated instead an increased role for peacebuilding within peace operations, which had until then been regarded as the primary responsibility of the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the UN Development Programme (Gourlay, 2009: 15). The panel, moreover, suggested the creation of a Best Practices Unit to increase the organization’s capacities for systematic knowledge acquisition (Diehl, 2008: 69).

The organization’s own research capacity, however, only increased after 2003. The declassification of DPKO archives and invitations to researchers to visit missions made the organization attractive for research. Within the organization, the ‘policy people’ became known for constantly asking for information and data, which created tensions with operation-running people in the DPA (Bellamy et al., 2004: 49). Through their experiences from the field they became convinced that, in order to keep the UN relevant in the area of peacekeeping, it was necessary to redefine the organization’s strategies and purposes. As new boundary spanners they established systematic channels for incorporating knowledge on the consequences of elections and new aspects for post-conflict peacebuilding in order to challenge existing principles for mission exit. This increasing awareness resulted in a rising openness of the organization.

The consultations between the UN and its external research environment intensified in the years after the publication of the Brahimi report. In discussion rounds and seminars, open to various staff levels from the Secretariat, field missions and member state representatives, external experts presented the implications of the new knowledge on exit strategies. They facilitated the meetings as knowledge brokers, while the UN officials could react to the presentations and assess the usefulness of the new knowledge from the organization’s point of view. Written summaries of the discussions and their recommendations were then disseminated among roughly 4,000 people, including UN staff, policy-makers in UN member states’ delegations and capitals, academia and civil society organizations.

At the level of the DPKO senior staff, former Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Jean-Marie Guéhenno actively promoted more systematic knowledge acquisition within the department. He was convinced that understanding and changing peacekeeping required a new working and evaluation culture (Benner et al., 2011: 34). With the integration of the Lessons Learned Unit into the Peacekeeping Best Practices Section (PBPS), now part of the newly established Division for Policy, Evaluation and Training (DPET), systematic structures for knowledge acquisition have been further incorporated into the organization. An important method for the PBPS to interact with external research institutes is to employ individual, independent consultants from a variety of backgrounds for specific projects. This tendency to hire temporary staff with experience in independent research or fieldwork as a form of institutionalized knowledge acquisition is another type of channel through which knowledge from epistemic communities enters the organization. It is especially present in the PBPS, where
knowledge from external experts is complemented by evaluations and reports from the field level. Given these multiple channels through which new knowledge entered the organization, how has a shared understanding of the role of peacebuilding in the context of exit strategies been developed?

**Knowledge interpretation**

**Development of shared knowledge within the Secretariat.** Within the Secretariat, the interdepartmental Executive Committee on Peace and Security (ECPS) and the high-level Policy Committee (PC), both created under Annan, have been significantly involved in knowledge interpretation. Discussions in the ECPS relied on knowledge provided by the Brahimi report and adopted the view that the transition to sustainable peace was essential for a successful mission exit. A shared understanding evolved that peacebuilding aspects needed to be incorporated in peacekeeping exit strategies. This interpretation, however, required a revaluation of existing practices and structures as peacebuilding competencies were contested between the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the DPKO. As a consequence, integrated missions were developed which were intended to incorporate central peacebuilding tasks into early mission planning. Despite several shortcomings and setbacks, this introduced the new consensual knowledge on the intertwined relationship between peacekeeping exit and peacebuilding to the DPKO’s operational strategies as well as on the field level (Campbell and Kaspersen, 2008: 473).

The weekly meeting agenda of the Secretary-General’s PC, the Secretariat’s highest decision-making body created by Annan in 2005, includes the concept of peacekeeping transition in country-specific discussions on how to end an operation, as well as thematic discussions encompassing different aspects of peacebuilding. The body’s mode of consultation was intended to decide on the best of all possible solutions through argumentative debate: “Substantive differences should not be downplayed and clear arguments and choices should be presented for the Policy Committee’s consideration.” Although external members from other UN agencies are admitted if the agenda item requires, the meetings are usually limited to the committee members and are confidential in character. This framework supports a mode of deliberation in which the exchange of arguments leads to the development of shared meanings for the Secretariat’s policy orientation. Based on the organization’s past experiences highlighted in the Brahimi report, the debates on mission exit have increasingly been shaped by the concept of transition.

These high-level interpretation processes were complemented by various efforts of knowledge interpretation in other sections within the Secretariat. Under the leadership of David Harland and Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the DPKO’s Peacekeeping Best Practices Section (PBPS) launched a doctrine development process in 2005 that relied on a reflective process of discussing and interpreting new knowledge with internal staff and external experts (Ahmed et al., 2007; Bellamy et al., 2004: 141). From this ‘Peace Operations 2010’ reform agenda emerged the ‘Capstone Doctrine’, in which the interdependence between peacekeeping exit and sustainable peace was confirmed for the first time as shared knowledge in an official (though non-binding) UN document on the principles of peacekeeping (cf. United Nations Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)
The document established a catalogue of exit criteria that were grounded in peacebuilding tasks, but challenged the previous consensus within the Secretariat on integrated missions (Gowan, 2006; United Nations Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS), 2008: 55). Experiences from the field provided the authors of the document with new arguments against the dominant interpretation of integrated missions as an adequate instrument for sustainable peace (Benner et al., 2011: 185).

Further consultations between the Secretariat and epistemic communities within the New Horizon framework in 2009, however, again put integrated missions back in the centre of the discourse on how to plan peacekeeping exits. Under the new leadership of Alain Le Roy, the DPKO together with the Department of Field Support (DFS), created in 2007 by Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon, asked researchers from the Center of International Cooperation (CIC) to develop a paper in order to advance the post-Brahimi discussion on peacekeeping challenges. The conclusions and recommendations of this ‘think piece’ based on experiences from past integrated missions were adopted by the ‘New Partnership Agenda’, which advocated the approach of ‘integrated peacebuilding’ in exit planning (United Nations Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), 2009). This was accompanied by the DPKO Guidelines for Integrated Missions 2009, generated by an inter-departmental working group, which stressed the importance of Integrated Missions Task Forces (IMTF) on the headquarters level while taking past field experiences and best practices into account (United Nations Secretary-General, 2009).

The shared knowledge within the UN Secretariat that was developed in discussions of the Brahimi report and subsequent studies therefore re-introduced integrated missions as the appropriate policy instrument for achieving sustainable peace through a transition-based approach to mission exit. In contrast to earlier initiatives, The New Horizon strategy paper explicitly invites UN members, especially troop-contributing and peacekeeping financing countries, to participate in an open dialogue that would further a ‘shared understanding among all stakeholders of the objectives of UN peacekeeping’ (United Nations Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), 2009). Thus, the knowledge interpretation process within the Secretariat is still ongoing and increasingly involves other actors from the UN peace operations system.

**Member states’ interpretation of knowledge.** Within the General Assembly, the Brahimi report did not prompt any major reflection processes which could have led to the interpreting of new knowledge on exit strategies. Its Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations adopted the report’s recommendations, however, without any reaction to the issues revealed by new knowledge on peace and post-conflict stabilization. The Committee’s regular ‘Reviews of the question of peacekeeping in all its aspects’ have not included any references to the role of exit strategies and the implications of peacebuilding thus far. Thus, the question of redefining exit strategies was mainly restricted to Security Council meetings.

The Security Council debate which took place in November 2000 under the title ‘No exit without strategy’ essentially centred on the role of peacebuilding and how it should be connected to multi-dimensional peace operations. Although the debate, as usual, consisted of pre-formulated statements of member states representatives, the speakers
referred to each other’s arguments while developing their own positions. Most statements endorsed the recommendations of the Brahimi report which suggested a concept of exit that included more than the short-term strategy of elections. A consensus emerged that a different approach was required in order to enable the organization to pursue the provisions of the Charter, namely to ensure sustainable peace and stabilization. The debate reveals that the members of the Security Council interpreted the knowledge provided by Brahimi as useful for addressing the issue of mission exit and enjoyed wide acceptance.

In addition to the traditional mode of debate in the Security Council, a new mechanism of consultation had an important impact on knowledge interpretation. The so-called ‘Arria Formula’ provides a means for SC member states to meet with non-members in informal, closed-door settings. Meetings were opened to other member states and included the participation of NGOs, a novum in the state-centred debates of the body. The question of transition was first discussed in an Arria Formula in 2001, in which speakers from the New York-based epistemic communities and NGOs addressed the issue with regard to the case of East Timor. This furthered the interpretation of new knowledge on exit strategies in light of a particular case through a more reflexive exchange of arguments with the organization’s external environment. In open debates in 2001 and 2004, the SC recognized the importance of long-term actions for sustainable peace and referred to the relevance of peacebuilding for peacekeeping mandates. This process of opening SC discussions to non-state actors was continued in 2004, when members of NGOs with rich field experience were for the first time allowed to speak in a SC session. In this session, their presentations helped to inform the debate on the role of civil society in peacebuilding processes. The increasing openness of the Security Council, initiated in the context of discussions on peacebuilding, indicates that the inclusion of other actors was considered by SC members as appropriate for addressing the issue of peacekeeping exit strategies.

**Knowledge institutionalization**

Once acquired and interpreted, the newly developed consensual knowledge had to be anchored in the organization’s bureaucratic structures and decision-making processes if it was to cause sustainable institutional change. In the early years after Brahimi, the first institutionalization steps did not involve fundamental shifts in the existing organizational memory. Instead, different components of peacebuilding were integrated into the DPKO’s work (see Ahmed et al., 2007: 20). With the establishment of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) by the ECPS in 2005, however, important aspects of the new consensual knowledge became institutionalized systematically. As a result of the long-lasting intra-organizational discussion and interpretation process on the link between peacebuilding and peacekeeping, this working group highlighted the need for the inclusion of other UN actors. It assembled more than 15 sub-agencies, which ensured that the knowledge on the role of peacebuilding aspects for peacekeeping missions was disseminated throughout the organization. As the organization’s own peacebuilding expertise is still limited, this pooling of existing capacities has become even more important for implementing the new knowledge (see Benner et al., 2011: 213).
Institutionalization in the discourse. Among the Secretariat’s staff, the term ‘exit strategies’ has increasingly been replaced by ‘transition towards longer-term development and sustainable peace’.\(^{32}\) This linguistic shift in the discourse has since been observable despite the regular personnel turnover within the administrative structure of the DPKO and a change in leadership in 2007.\(^{33}\) Both the Capstone Doctrine as well as the New Horizon document, for example, frequently refer to transition when discussing peacekeeping exit (United Nations Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS), 2008; United Nations Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), 2009). Organizational memory has thus stored the shared understanding of the role of peacebuilding in the Secretariat’s discourse and has rendered it independent from individuals.

Institutional anchoring: The Peacebuilding Commission. The establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) at the UN World Summit in 2005 eventually anchored the new knowledge on sustainable peace institutionally and gave peacebuilding an organizational face.\(^{34}\) The PBC is one of the first serious efforts to combine the long-separated areas of security and development and is mandated to pool the organization’s capacities for sustainable peace.\(^{35}\) Discussions within the body itself as well as in the run-up to the New Horizon initiative refer to the PBC as being important for a ‘sustainable exit’ of the military components of peace operations.\(^{36}\) The SC debates on peacekeeping and exit strategies in 2009 and 2010, as well as the body’s resolutions on peacekeeping mandates and exits, refer to the PBC as being essential for peace operation exit planning.\(^{37}\) This highlights the successful anchoring of the shared understanding on sustainable peace in the UN structure. Moreover, with the creation of the Working Group on Lessons Learned in 2007, an additional learning capacity has been established in the context of the PBC itself. The Working Group serves as focal point for consultations among member states, UN staff as well as representatives of the civil society on thematic peacebuilding issues and working methods of the PBC. It considers the role of the PBC as essential for linking peacekeeping with peacebuilding tasks and advocates a closer relationship with the SC in the process of mandating peacekeeping operations.\(^{38}\) The organization thus established external and internal feedback channels that complemented the implementation of the PBC, which can be characterized as deutero-learning.

Interestingly, the establishment of the PBC as an institutional mechanism for incorporating knowledge on the role of exit strategies for sustainable peace into the UN structure proved to be another instance of how epistemic communities influence learning. The idea for the PBC emerged out of one of the ‘off-the-record’ thematic dinners organized by the International Peace Institute (IPI) with members of the UN Security Council and other relevant states.\(^{39}\) This shows that not only theoretical concepts but also organizational bodies for institutionalizing new knowledge can be generated through the influence of epistemic communities.

In addition to the creation of the PBC, the 2010 review process of the body also demonstrates the influence of epistemic communities. The review responded to rising criticisms that questioned the efficiency and the legitimacy of the body’s work (Hirschmann, 2012; Slotin, 2010). New knowledge was acquired through a consultative process in order to assess whether the institutionalization of peacebuilding has been
successfully anchored. Facilitated by three member state representatives from Ireland, Mexico and South Africa, a UN-wide open communicative dialogue was initiated which convened relevant stakeholders and partner organizations.\(^4\) Several workshops were organized throughout 2010 in cooperation with leading members of the epistemic community, with participants from civil society organizations, member state representatives and experts from academia. This demonstrates the cyclical character of a learning process that in practice requires continuing feedback loops between the three steps of knowledge acquisition, interpretation and institutionalization. Moreover, the establishment of a formal review procedure indicates deutero-learning, as it points to an albeit temporary increase in the organization’s capacities for evaluating the institutionalization process.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored how the mechanism of organizational learning can explain the change in peacekeeping exit strategies from an election-based approach to peacebuilding. Conceiving learning as a three-step process of knowledge acquisition, knowledge interpretation and knowledge institutionalization, the analysis has revealed differences in the evolution and the intensity of the individual steps. Knowledge acquisition took place especially in the years after 2000 and has since then become systematized internally by the Peacekeeping Best Practices Section (PBPS) as the organization’s structure for acquiring input from the field and external researchers. The analysis of knowledge interpretation showed that while the knowledge on sustainable peace was adopted as the shared understanding equally quickly both within the bureaucratic structure and member states, the Secretariat, however, went through different interpretation phases when developing appropriate instruments. Knowledge institutionalization was characterized by the development of new organizational structures and evaluation capacities. With the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission in 2005, peacebuilding has become institutionalized as a necessary element for the transition of a peacekeeping mission. Additional deutero-learning capacities for evaluating the implementation have been created with the Working Group on Lessons Learned and the 2010 PBC Review Process.

What role did the other diffusion mechanisms such as coercion, competition or emulation play in the shift in peacekeeping exit strategies? Evidence suggests that learning might not be the sole explanatory mechanism but can be triggered or complemented by other mechanisms. Coercion was present at least at the beginning of the learning process, when material and normative pressure exerted by NGOs and member states after failures in Somalia, Rwanda and Cambodia contributed to a legitimacy crisis of UN peacekeeping in the early 1990s (Hirschmann, 2012). This helped to generate problem awareness within the organization, a prerequisite for the knowledge acquisition step. Furthermore, the increased concern of ‘keeping the UN relevant in peacekeeping’ in the early 2000s indicates that some elements of competition have been present, which stimulated UN staff to engage in boundary-spanning activities. The mechanism of emulation, however, would presuppose that another leading organization had introduced the shift towards peacebuilding earlier, which was not the case as peacebuilding originated within the UN. Nevertheless, the presence of coercion and competition confirms that organizational
learning, applied as an ideal-type mechanism in this case study, may actually be combined with other diffusion mechanisms (Börzel and Risse, 2007; Simmons et al., 2006). Thus, the interplay of different causal mechanisms requires further research to obtain a complete picture of institutional change in international organizations.

The analysis has furthermore provided some initial hints as to what factors might account for differences between learning processes. The influence of epistemic communities on international organizations has proved to be relevant in all three steps of learning. These findings confirm arguments on the openness and the interaction of international organizations with external actors (Haas, 1992). Additionally, it seems that both the bureaucratic and intergovernmental levels need to perform distinctive functions with regard to knowledge acquisition and interpretation. The active leadership of a member state (coalition) and individuals within the Secretariat appears to determine the intensity of organizational learning processes. This is in line with the existing literature on the role of individuals for norm entrepreneurship (Benner et al., 2011; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 897). Another important although less concrete factor is ‘organizational culture’ (Hailey and James, 2002). The debating style within the organization influences whether different arguments are taken into consideration. The analysis of the knowledge interpretation process indicates that deliberative settings (Risse, 2000) are conducive to a learning process. Determining which of these conditions are necessary or sufficient for organizational learning could complement the existing IR research on the internal dynamics of international organizations.

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**Notes**

3. In the article herein, no distinction is made between tacit and explicit knowledge as discussed by quite a number of theorists, since the former can hardly be observed empirically (cf. Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2006b: 8). Huber’s fourth step, knowledge distribution, is not regarded as a separate step but instead considered as inherent in the other three steps.
4. For a discussion of individual vs. organizational learning, see Kim (1993).
5. In the literature, the terms ‘epistemic community’ and ‘think tank’ are used interchangeably, although think tanks constitute a sub-group of epistemic communities.
8. See, for example, Ginifer (1996) and other contributions in the Special Issue of *International Peacekeeping* 3(2) under the title ‘Beyond the Emergency: Development within UN Peace Missions’ that emphasized the role of longer-term developmental aspects for sustainable peace.
9. This article draws upon a set of 14 qualitative interviews with UN senior staff and officials as well as with members of the New York based UN-related think tanks. These were conducted by the author in autumn 2009. According to interviewees, both inside the UN and from the New York-based research community, the most influential are the Center for International Cooperation at the New York University, the International Peace Institute, Stimson Center in Washington, DC, individual researchers from King’s College London, the Centre for International Studies at Oxford University, Wilton Park, the Canadian Ditchley Foundation, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Uppsala University, the Stockholm Peace Research Institute, the Centre d’études et de recherches internationals in Paris, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, and the Center for International Peace Operations Berlin. The Institute for Security Studies in South Africa and Kofi Annan Peacekeeping Center in Ghana, which opened in 2004, are regarded as the most influential non-Western research institutes. The United Nations University is acting as a boundary-spanner between New York and Japan and thus trying to include Asian perspectives.
10. For an epistemic community to effectively channel ideas into the organization, it is necessary to know the ‘right people’, those who are influential in the system, and to understand the politics within the Secretariat. Agenda-setting through outside researchers is therefore rare (personal interview with Francesco Mancini, International Peace Institute New York (IPI), 24 November 2009).
14. Personal interview with David Harland, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, New York, 2 December 2009. He emphasized that this happened while foreseeing that some of the new knowledge thus acquired would not have been ‘good’ knowledge.
15. By most of the interviewees, the ‘policy people’ were cited as being the most open-minded, problem-solving members of the organization and acted as boundary-spanners between the UN and the research community.
17. Personal interview with Francesco Mancini, IPI, New York, 24 November 2009.
19. The committee, established in 1997, is chaired by the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and meets at the Under-Secretary-General level.
21. UN Doc. A/60/696, part II.
22. Telephone interview with Oliver Ulich, UN Secretariat of the Policy Committee, 30 March 2010.
26. UN Doc. GA/PK/169.
28. UN Doc. S/PV.4223.
29. The formula is named after the former Venezuelan ambassador, Diego Arria, who initiated a first meeting in 1992 (see Paul, 2003).
33. Personal interviews with UN staff revealed different opinions on the influence of personnel turnover on knowledge institutionalization: one side argues that it enhances the institutionalization through wide and regular dissemination, others argue that it hinders the building of systematic organizational memory.
34. The Department of Political Affairs attempted to include peacebuilding in its policy and organizational structure through the establishment of Peacebuilding Support Offices. However, it was denied the inclusion in the regular budget and thus had to rely on extra-budgetary means and donations for funding (cf. Durch et al., 2003).
35. UN Doc. S/Res/1645.
37. UN Doc. S/PV.6270; UN Doc. SC/9860.
40. UN Doc. A/64/868-S/2010/393.

References


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